

Considering the Lord's Supper in the life of Waverly Place Baptist Church

The aim of this paper is to give you insight into our approach to the Lord's Table at the conclusion of each of our Sunday morning gatherings. As the pastors of WPBC, we desire that these times would be a meaningful expression of our union with Christ & our unity with His body in this place. This reflects what we expressly believe about the Supper, as stated in our church's Statement of Faith, Article 11: *We believe that the Lord's Supper is a local church's commemoration of the Lord's death "till He comes;" providing believers with spiritual nourishment & growth in Jesus Christ, being a sign & pledge of their communion with Him & with one another.*

Outlined below, we have summarized much of what is wrapped up in this statement & why we are moving to partaking weekly, instead of monthly.

What does the Bible tell us about the Lord's Supper?

It tells us something about God's plan of redemption

In Leviticus 1-10 God gives instruction to His people on how they are to approach Him in relationship & worship. The central thread is sacrifice. For His people to have a relationship with a holy & pure God, they would need to trust by faith that God would pardon their sin & rebellion. We find here that this faith worked itself out through the sacrificial death of an animal, making atonement & payment for sin. Where the sacrificial system of the Old Testament foreshadow the work of Christ, the Lord's Supper reminds us that God's plan has always been to redeem His people by having another take their debt away through death.

It tells us something about Jesus life & death

As we move into the New Testament, we find that the Lord's Supper also reminds us of who Jesus is & what He did for us. He is not only fully God, but also fully man. The bread & the cup symbolize His body & blood — a real body & true blood, which He gave over to mocking, beating & flogging, finally being pierced, crushed & poured out, making the required atonement for sin upon a Roman cross.

It tells us something about Jesus' return & reign

1 Corinthians 11:26 tell us that "as often as you eat this bread & drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." We find here that we are to partake of the Supper with a hopeful anticipation. Every time we eat the bread & drink the cup, we do so knowing that it will not be the last time we eat & drink around the Lamb. We eat & drink now, knowing that a day will come when we will be face to face with our sacrificial Lamb, partaking of a glorious Marriage Feast (Revelation 19:6-9).

It tells us something about life in the body of believers

Finally, the Bible tells us that this meal is not a meal of individuality, but a meal of the body. 1 Corinthians 10:17 tells us: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." What does this mean? The Bible is teaching us here that the Lord's Supper is a family meal, showing who's in the family & who is not. We are taught that this meal is reserved for those who are a part of the body of Christ, in fact, it is the ongoing sign given to us by Christ that outwardly declares our union with Him & our fellowship with His people. This normally finds its expression in the life of the local church, as we'll explore below.

Why are we beginning to take the Lord's Supper weekly?

For Personal Nourishment

The corporate side of the Lord's Supper doesn't remove the means of grace that the meal holds out for us individually. Practically speaking, partaking of the Supper weekly allows individual believers to re-commit themselves to following Jesus, re-covenant themselves with Jesus' people & re-remind themselves of the hope in Jesus' return.

For Corporate Nourishment

Partaking weekly also allows the church as a whole to push deeper into unity & maturity. By partaking each week, the church is not just committing to eating & drinking, but committing to maintain the unity necessary to “commune” at a deep & spiritual level. This is exactly what Paul is calling for in 1 Corinthians 11:33-34, when he says: “So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another— if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment.” The discerning individually has a purpose in bringing health corporately.

For Evangelistic Nourishment

Lastly, the Lord’s Supper partaken weekly also takes on a more focused evangelistic nature. By visibly declaring our commitment to Christ & His people every week, we display to those who are not Christians, who are visiting with us, that our following of Jesus actually means something. In a world where commitments are loose & community is transient, to reflect the sturdiness of our bond & the depth of our affection can be powerful & stirring to those looking on. The Lord’s Supper allows us to reflect this in a special, Christ-centered way.

What will partaking of the Lord’s Supper weekly look like?

One of the common pushbacks to partaking of the Lord’s Supper weekly is that it will lose it’s significance & meaning. This argument is certainly true if the pastoral administration of the Supper becomes robotic & monotonous. But much in the same way that sermons & music are refreshing each week through thoughtful consideration & application, the WPBC pastors will give themselves to ensure the Lord’s Supper will be the same. Below is an outline of how the Lord’s Supper will take a different shape each week.

Week 1 — Looking Around: The Supper in the Life of the Church

On the first Sunday of each month we’ll consider the Lord’s Supper as mark of our unity as a local church. Meditating on passages like 1 Corinthians 11:27-29, we’ll consider if we are living in ways that are detrimental to our brothers & sisters in Christ or that do not promote the unity of our church family. The Lord’s Supper is the regular reminder that we are good with Jesus & that we are good with one another. If one or both of these is not true, then we should not take the Supper. If they are, then we are to enjoy this meal as we look around together, acknowledging the unity we have in Christ Jesus & working to maintain the bonds of peace. These weeks will also include a corporate confession of sin, as we have normally done on the first Sunday of each month.

Week 2 — Looking Back: The Supper in Light of the Old Testament

On the second Sunday of each month we’ll consider who God is & what He has done. Since God has graciously saved us through Christ the Son, it is appropriate for us to acknowledge He is central. So, when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper with our church family, look back & consider all God has done. He is the unchanging God who is merciful & gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love & faithfulness (Exodus 34:6-7). These weeks will include a corporate Scripture reading, often taken from the Old Testament, as we have normally done on the second Sunday of each month.

Week 3 — Looking In: The Supper in Light of the Life & Death of Christ

On the third Sunday of each month we’ll consider exactly what these elements represent in Jesus Christ. We notice in the Last Supper that Jesus uses the simple elements of bread & cup to show that He has broken His body & spilled His blood to usher in the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-33). God forgives sinners through this everlasting covenant. He is the better Priest & the better Sacrifice, & the blood of the spotless Lamb is sufficient to save sinners like you & me (Hebrews 7:26-27, 9:12). The Lord’s Supper looks deep into the cross. These weeks will include a corporate confession of faith, taken from our own Statement of Faith or a historical creed, as we have normally done on the third Sunday of each month.

Week 4 — Looking Ahead: The Supper in Light of Christ Future Return

On the fourth Sunday of each month we’ll consider the Lord’s Supper in light of Christ’s future return. Jesus says that He will not drink this cup again until He does so with His people in the coming kingdom. He’s anticipating another meal &, when we take the Lord’s Supper, we are too. We are looking forward to the great marriage Supper of the Lamb when the entire Church is gathered together to boast in the great saving work of Christ (Revelation 19:6-9). Amen. Come Lord Jesus! These weeks will include a corporate Scripture reading, often taken from the New Testament, emphasizing our future hope in Christ, as we have normally done on the fourth Sunday of each month.

Week 5 — The Mark of Baptism or Looking Again: The Supper in Light of the Life & Death of Christ

If there is a fifth Sunday in the month, we will plan to take one of two avenues, depending on need. Our first hope is that fifth Sundays will be reserved for Baptisms, as we welcome new Christians into our church family. For those fifth Sundays when there are no Baptisms, we will again focus on the life & death of Christ, revisiting the theme of week 3.

How should we prepare to take the Lord's Supper each week?

Rightfully so, we should approach the idea of partaking of the Lord's Supper weekly with soberness & consideration. There are stern warnings given in the New Testament when it comes to who & how we should partake (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). For this reason, moving to a weekly Lord's Table requires us to grow in maturity in how we prepare for gathering & taking the bread & the cup with the saints on Sunday mornings. In light of this, below are three ways that you can give yourself to this both throughout the week & during the Sunday morning service leading up to the Supper at the conclusion.

Prepare with reading & meditation

The first way we can prepare for the Lord's Supper is by considering God himself. This comes primarily through our reading & meditating on God's Word. In moving to a weekly observance of the Supper, the most impactful way to do this could come in one of two ways. First, meditating on the sermon passage to be preached on Sunday morning will provide you both with a heart ready to receive the exposition of the Bible & frame your thinking of the Lord's Supper within this text, considering areas of praise, confession or thanksgiving in light of God's preached Word. Second, we can use the Bible Reading plan as a means of meditating deeply on shorter passages from the Word. Both give us an opportunity to consider Who this God is that has saved us through the body & blood of His Son.

Prepare with thanksgiving & confession

The next way we can prepare for the Lord's Supper is by considering who we are. This happens primarily through our prayers of thanksgiving & confession. As we prepare to come to the Table each week, we should spend dedicated time praising & worshipping God in gratitude for drawing us to Himself through the atoning work of Christ. As the bread & cup represent, we give the Father great thanksgiving for sending the Son on our behalf. This also moves us into a time of confession & repentance, where we agree with God about our sin — that is, we have not honored Him & not walked in holiness in the world He created. Our confession & repentance should be marked by both sorrow & hate of our sin, but not full of guilt & condemnation, as we call on Him for renewed grace & mercy, & a renewed strength through the Holy Spirit to resist temptation & fight the fear & shame that accompanies rebellion from God.

Prepare with renewal & resolution

The final way we can prepare to partake of the Supper moves from our vertical relationship with God to our horizontal relationship with one another. In light of this meal being a family meal, we should prepare ourselves not only by cultivation our relationship with God, but by also guarding our relationships with one another. This is why we will, from time to time, consider our church covenant in light of the Lord's Supper. As we prepare to come to the Table each week, we should use whatever means we are given to ensure that our relationships with one another are free from all deceit, hypocrisy, jealousy, and all unkind speech (1 Peter 2:1). We should all ensure that we are building one another up, bearing with one another, & encouraging one another through discipleship & care.

By taking up these gifts in our preparation, we are able to come to the Table with a clear conscience, a reverent attitude & a marked unity in the household of faith.

What does it mean when our pastors FENCE the Lord's Table?

While the main aim of the Lord's Supper is to draw the saints of this local church in unified exaltation & celebration of Jesus Christ, you may also notice that we open the Table to other believers within certain parameters. This is what has historically been known as fencing the Table. What exactly does this mean, though?

Closed, Open & Close Communion

Throughout church history there has been several approaches to who the Lord's Supper is offered to when it is taken up. Some have taken the approach of *closed* communion where only the members of a certain gathered church are welcomed to the Table. This is done in an effort to ensure that no one comes to the Table in an unworthy manner & to ensure that the sacredness of what is being observed remains intact. At the same time, others have argued for an *open* communion, wherein anyone is allowed to partake, no matter their commitment level to Christ or to His body. This has been done in a desire to be welcoming and inclusive. At WPBC, the elders have sought to find a middle ground, in what has become known as *close* communion.

While all members of WPBC in good standing, not currently under church discipline are welcomed to the Lord's Table, we also want to make allowance for other believers to join us. Because Baptism is the mark of entrance into the body of Christ, and because being committed to that body is an essential part of Christian discipleship, we are happy to welcome anyone to the Table who has taken the step of making their faith in Jesus public through Baptism & is maintaining that public profession through living in accountability with a local church. As we administer the elements, the elders make note of this, welcoming anyone who is in this category.

We also want to use this time evangelistically, as mentioned above. So, while we will fence the table from those who are not yet ready to partake with us, we do want to redeem the time in calling them to look on in consideration of how they are called to repent of their sin & believe on Jesus Christ, who purchased us through His body & blood.

What we are saying when we commune together

Now, why would we advocate such a position? Would it not be more careful to only limit the Lord's Supper to the members of our church? Or perhaps it would be more loving to open the Table to everyone who is attending?

The reason we want to strike a balance and create both an exclusive (see closed) and inclusive (see open) atmosphere around the Lord's table is because of what partaking declares. As outlined above, partaking of the bread & the cup is the ongoing declaration that Jesus gave to His people that He has purchased them — not just individuals — but a body, for Himself. As our Living Head, when we partake of the Table as a church, with other believers included, we are altogether claiming that Jesus is everything we need to be sustained.

What we are saying when we commune together is that we are His, and He is ours, and we are declaring it all together as His people.

The Family Meal of the King

The final thing worth considering is not only what this meal represents in the past, but to look forward to what it means to us in glory with Christ. As He founded the Lord's Supper with His disciples in Matthew 26, Jesus told us: "I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." (Matthew 26:29)

What does this mean, in short? It means that Jesus has given us the Lord's Supper to remind us that we are saved for another meal. We are saved to something better, something greater, something more filling that is to come. The Lord's Supper is a family meal, yes! But it is a family meal pointing us to the final & forever family meal with King Jesus sitting at the head of the table.

Until He returns, it is this Lord's Table we take up, remembering, rejoicing & waiting for the forever-day when we will feast with Him!