



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 11.1 – The Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper

### The Various Names of the Lord’s Supper

The Bible uses various terms in speaking of the Lord’s Supper. Christians throughout history have also used different words in referring to the Lord’s Supper.

The apostle Paul found fault with the Christians in Corinth for the way they were abusing the Lord’s Supper, saying to them: **“Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper”** (1 Corinthians 11:20). His emphasis is on the word “Lord”. What they were doing was not the Lord’s Supper because they were not following the Lord’s instruction. The same emphasis on the Lord is found in chapter 10 of the same letter when Paul says: **“You cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons”** (1 Corinthians 10:21).

It is probable, or at least possible, that there is a reference to the Lord’s Supper in Luke’s description of the activity of the early Christian congregation in Jerusalem after Pentecost. He writes: **“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers”** (Acts 2:42). Some have found reference to the Lord’s Supper in the term “fellowship” (*κοινωνία koinōnia* in the Greek) and others in the term “breaking of bread”. But the “breaking of bread” may simply refer to the eating of meals together, for the account in Acts continues: **“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart”** (Acts 2:46).

The breaking of bread refers to the fact that their bread was in loaves, and in its distribution, pieces were broken off and given to the various individuals who were participating. Both the breaking of bread and *koinōnia* are mentioned by the apostle Paul when referring to the Lord’s Supper. He wrote to the Corinthians: **“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion (*koinōnia*) of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion (*koinōnia*) of the body of Christ?”** (1 Corinthians 10:16). Paul’s account of the first Lord’s Supper informs us that Jesus **“took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you’”** (1 Corinthians 11:23-24).

The fact that Jesus gave “thanks” before distributing the bread of the Lord’s Supper explains why another term for the Lord’s Supper is the word “eucharist”, which is derived from the Greek word for thanksgiving (*εὐχαριστία eucharistia*). We find this same reference to thanksgiving in Matthew 26:27, Mark 14:23, and Luke 22:19. For this reason many Christian groups refer to the Lord’s Supper as the Eucharist or the Thanksgiving Meal.

Another common term used by Christians with reference to the Lord’s Supper is the word “communion” or “holy communion”. As we have already seen, “communion” is one of the English words used to translate the Greek word *koinōnia*. Another English word used to translate *koinōnia* is the word “fellowship”, as in Acts 2:42. When one person has fellowship with another person, this means they have something in common with one another. They are joined together in some way. In the Lord’s Supper there is a fellowship, communion, or close union between the bread and the body of Christ, and between the wine in the cup and the blood of Christ. There is also a close fellowship, communion, or close union between all those who are partaking of the bread and wine and the Lord’s body and blood. Paul wrote: **“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the**

**blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body, for we all partake of that one bread”** (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

Another common term for the Lord’s Supper is the Sacrament of the Altar. In the Old Testament there were several altars on which offerings were made to God in accordance with His commands. All of these sacrifices pointed ahead to the one sacrifice that truly atones for sin, and that is the offering of Christ on the altar of the cross. The Lord’s Supper gives us the benefits of Christ’s one sacrifice: the forgiveness of sins. In a secondary sense, the table in our places of worship to which our offerings of thanksgiving are brought is an altar. In the early church, the members brought bread and wine and laid them on the table (or altar) for use in the Lord’s Supper. The bread and wine in our services are also placed on the table (or altar) for distribution to those partaking of the Lord’s Supper. The letter to the Hebrews draws a contrast between the Old Testament and the New Testament in these words: **“We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat”** (Hebrews 13:10). Those who are not Christians have no right to partake of the Lord’s body and blood in the Lord’s Supper.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the common word for the Lord’s Supper is “Mass”. This word comes from the Latin word *missa*, which was used in the early church in dismissing the people before the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, as only the instructed Christians could partake of it. This word “Mass” is used in some of our Lutheran confessions to refer to the Lord’s Supper.

We can also call the Lord’s Supper the meal of the “new covenant” in contrast to the old covenant of the Sinai law. In distributing the wine to His disciples Jesus said: **“This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you”** (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). The new covenant was promised already by the prophet Jeremiah, and the heart of this new covenant was God’s promise: **“I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more”** (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

It seems that the early Christians often ate a common meal together with their Lord’s Supper. Jude, the brother of James and Jesus, referred to such meals as **“love feasts”**. He wrote: **“These are spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving only themselves”** (Jude 12). Apparently, there were unbelievers pretending to be Christians who took part in their love feasts. No doubt Peter was referring to the same thing when he wrote: **“They are spots and blemishes, carousing in their own deceptions while they feast with you, having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin, enticing unstable souls”** (2 Peter 2:13-14). It is likely that, because of this abuse, the early Christians soon separated the Lord’s Supper from their regular common meals.

When the apostle Paul spoke of himself and other ministers **“as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God”** (1 Corinthians 4:1), he no doubt was thinking of the Lord’s Supper as one of those mysteries of which Christian ministers are stewards (or caretakers). Church leaders are responsible for how the Lord’s Supper is handled in their midst.

## Questions

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1. Why is it so important to remember that the Lord’s Supper is the Lord’s Supper?
2. What is meant by the breaking of bread?
3. What is the communion in the Lord’s Supper?
4. What is the difference between the Old Testament sacrifices and the New Testament sacrifice?
5. What is the word used in the Roman Catholic Church for the Lord’s Supper?
6. What is the new covenant?
7. What is the common term for the Lord’s Supper in your locale?