

“THE CUP” OF THE LORD’S SUPPER

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You asked “What does the Bible say specifically about the Lord’s Supper? I heard a pastor for the last three weeks talking about the “cup” being the covenant of the New Testament Church. Matt. 26:28; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25. Is the cup to be taken literally?”

Brief Background

This is a good question to ask because it shows a recognition that what we do in worship to God today, should be the same as it was in the times that the Bible was written. Man has no permission from God to worship any way he chooses. When God has chosen and revealed what He expects about worship, we must not change His ways. God has revealed His will about the Lord’s Supper, so we must guard against adding to what He taught or subtracting from it—maintaining the simplicity that is in Christ (2 Cor. 11:3).

Acts 2:42 introduces the practice of “breaking bread” as something that Christians have continued steadfastly in doing since the church of Christ began. Breaking bread, when mentioned in the context of prayer and Bible teaching, is the Lord’s Supper.

This expression is also seen in Acts 20:7, where we learn that Christians came together to “break bread” in memory of Jesus’ death on the first day of the week—the day which all four gospel writers identified as the day of Jesus’ resurrection and thus the day which John identified as “the Lord’s Day” (Revelation 1:10). Many religious people worship on the Lord’s Day but do not eat the Lord’s Supper on the Lord’s Day. This is a common departure from what God has revealed about the Lord’s Supper, as some eat the Lord’s Supper once a quarter or once a year.

What is “the cup”?

In Matthew 26, compare verses 27 and 29. Notice that Jesus refers to “the cup” in the same way as He does “the fruit of the vine.” By its nature, liquid must have a container to be useful, especially for drinking. We often refer to the container and the contents as one and the same. Have you ever heard a waitress ask a coffee drinker “Would you like another cup?” What is she offering him—an additional container or additional coffee? Often, in that situation, she’ll just refill his current container, and he is content now that he has “another cup.” See?

A similar example, in a different area, is this—the place where children meet to learn is called “school.” But is the school the building or is the school the students and teachers? If the building burns down, that is not the end of the school, it is just the end of the building. Anywhere those people go to teach/learn is school because **THEY** are the school. But the building (which is the “container” for the students and teachers) often takes on the identity of the people in it. Thus, the old term for the building was the “schoolhouse”—the house (structure, container) of the school (students and teachers). The word “church” has sometimes been used likewise—referring to the building when really the people are the church. And, likewise, “the cup” can refer more to the *contents* of the container and less to the container itself. Let’s study Matthew 26 to see whether Jesus was referring more to the container or the liquid in the container.

What is symbolized by “the cup”?

Now, back to the original text. When Jesus took the cup and said to drink from it—did He attach any symbolism to the container? In Matthew 26:28, Jesus said “This is my blood of the new covenant.” What represented His blood—the container or the liquid in the container? It is

easy to see how the grape juice (“fruit of the vine”) is a perfect symbol of Jesus’ blood. But how does the container represent Jesus’ blood? It doesn’t. And, in case we might think that the container represents Jesus’ body (as his body was the “container” for His blood), we see that in verse 26, Jesus said that the bread represents His body. So the bread represents Jesus’ body, and the juice represents His blood. Jesus says nothing about the symbolism of the actual container.

The body and blood of Jesus fully represent His death (1 Corinthians 11:26), and the purpose of the Lord’s supper is to remember His death (1 Corinthians 11:24-25). This requires bread and the fruit of the vine—and of minor importance is the container of the liquid. (A related point--some people have emphasized that only one container should be used when drinking the fruit of the vine, claiming that it represents the unity of the saints. But, this is a meaning which God did not reveal. It’s a nice thought—but God did not symbolize unity by a single container. Unity exists because all saints eat and drink the same elements for the same purposes. Unity is present by what we do, not by any symbol in the Lord’s Supper. You might or might not have heard of this teaching).

Regarding the cup and the covenant

Jesus’ death (body and blood) is the key element of the new covenant. There is background for this in the Old Testament, taught in Hebrews 9:17-18, “For a testament is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator lives. Therefore not even the first covenant was dedicated without blood.” The covenant between God and Israel was dedicated with (animal) blood. The new covenant, between God and those He saves through Jesus Christ, was dedicated by Jesus’ “blood of the new covenant.” No container has ever been the sign, seal, or symbol of a God-given covenant, to my knowledge.

Obviously, I did not hear all that the pastor presented. From what you have told me, it seems that the mistake of the pastor you heard, is that he is making TWO symbols where Jesus only made ONE symbol. The pastor is making the container to be a symbol and the liquid to be another symbol. Jesus used the container and the liquid interchangeably, to remind all who drink to remember the blood of the new covenant, which saved sinners thus purchasing the church (Acts 20:28).

Conclusion

The Lord’s Supper is a simple memorial. Two basic physical elements (bread and fruit of the vine) representing two basic elements of physical life (body and blood). On the Lord’s Day, which is a memorial of Jesus’ resurrection, the Lord’s Supper is a memorial of Jesus’ death. Let nothing be done to corrupt the simplicity that is in Christ.