

How Often Did the Early Christian Observe the Lord's Supper?

"And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and brake it: and gave to the disciples, and said, Take, eat this is my body. And he took a cup, and gave thanks, and gave to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many unto remission of sins. But I say unto you, I shall not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (*Matthew 26:26-29*).



These verses briefly describe the special meal Jesus served and ate immediately before his death. Was this meal a one time event or is it to be repeated regularly by Christians today? If we depend entirely on Jesus' actions and accompanying remarks at this supper we would be at a total loss to know what he intended for the future.

However, prior to his ascension into heaven, Jesus instructed his apostles to teach his new converts "to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you . . ." (*Matthew 28:20*) To know what Jesus intended at this last supper, we are directed to his apostles to see what they taught and practiced. This is how the early churches knew how often they should observe the Lord's supper by the teaching delivered by the apostles.

THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM

Immediately after the church began under the direction of the apostles, the followers were continuing steadfastly in the breaking of bread (*Acts 2:42*). (This phrase was the earliest term used by Christians to refer to the supper instituted by Christ (*I Corinthians 10:16*).

How did this practice come about? They followed the teachings of the apostles (*Acts 2:42*). The church in Thessalonica, in turn, followed the example of these Christians in Jerusalem (*I Thessalonians 2:13, 14*).

Acts 2:42 indicates a regular sharing in the Lord's supper, but the question still remains, how often was it observed?

THE CHURCH IN TROAS

"And upon the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul discoursed with them, intending to depart on the morrow; and prolonged his speech until midnight" (*Acts 20:7*).

Here is the record of an apostle and his traveling companions meeting with the Christians in Troas to break bread on the first day of the week. The same elements of worship found in Acts 2:42 were present in Troas: the apostles' teaching, fellowship and breaking of bread. Like the first Christians, these at Troas were also continuing in the breaking of bread. Have you wondered upon WHICH first day of the week this assembling of Christians took place? This would be a valid question if it were to be a monthly, quarterly or annual event.

The text says it was 12 days after the Days of Unleavened Bread, another name for the Passover (*Acts 20:6*). Would any person claim that this was the annual date to break breads (Not even those who remember it annually claim this date!)

It is significant that Luke simply recorded it as being the first day of the week, the same word used when God told Israel to "Remember THE sabbath day .." (*Exodus 20:8*). Israel didn't ask, "Which sabbath day," because every week had a sabbath day. It was obviously EVERY sabbath day. And so in Acts 20:7 it is unmistakable that every first day of the week was their time to assemble and break bread.

THE CHURCH IN CORINTH

By the time the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, several spiritual problems had arisen - one being a gross abuse of the breaking of bread.

Paul began his remarks sharply by saying, "I praise you not, that ye come together not for the better but for the worse. First of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that divisions exist among you . . . When therefore ye assemble yourselves together, it is not possible to eat the Lord's Supper" (*I Corinthians 11:17,18,20*).

Their assemblies had been reduced to drunken feasts (*I Corinthians 11:21*) making it impossible to properly participate at the Lord's table. The teaching is evident that the Lord's supper was to be observed at their assemblies. Not evident in these verses, though, is WHEN they came together for their assemblies. If this could be known we could establish the frequency of the observance of the Lord's supper.

The answer to this question appears later in this same letter (*I Corinthians 16:1,2*). The Corinthian Christians met on the first day of the week! In fact, this was also a practice among the churches in Galatia, which Paul indicates in *I Corinthians 16:1*.

The *Didache* was written about AD 100. Here is what we find:

Didache 14:1

And on the Lord's own day gather yourselves together and break bread and give thanks, first confessing your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure.

Didache 14:2

And let no man, having his dispute with his fellow, join your assembly until they have been reconciled, that your sacrifice may not be defiled;

CONCLUSIONS

1. There is no specific command by Jesus or his apostles about the proper frequency of the Lord's supper observance.
2. Christians are obligated, however, to follow the examples of Christ's apostles: ". . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you . . ." (*Matthew 28:20*). "The things which ye both learned and received and heard and saw in me, these things do . . ." (*Philippians 4:9*).

The teaching and examples of the apostles infer only a weekly observance. Where did monthly, quarterly, semi annual or annual observances of communion come from? We can only say, they are not found in the Bible.

3. The same verses that show Christians ought to meet on the first day of the week (*Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:20; 16:2*) include remembering the Lord's death by the breaking of bread. If one is optional, so is the other. And, if they are optional then they are not necessary.

Like the churches in Jerusalem, Troas, Corinth, Thessalonica and Galatia, Christians today are meeting throughout the world, faithfully remembering the sacrifice that made their salvation possible. They invite you to return with them to the New Testament pattern of the Lord's church. You will find the Lord's table spread every Lord's day where you may commune with Christ in his kingdom.