The Lord’s Supper

What did Jesus intend—and how did Christians come to disagree?

From the New Testament to the Reformation

What Do We Call It?

Different names emphasize different dimensions of the observance.

New Testament language

- The Lord’s Supper — 1 Cor. 11:20
- Communion / participation — 1 Cor. 10:16
- Breaking bread — Acts 2:42; 20:7

Later historical usage

- Eucharist — thanksgiving (Greek)
- Mass — later Western liturgical term
- “Host” — a name for the consecrated bread

We will normally say “the Lord’s Supper,” but retain historical terminology when quoting sources.

What Does the New Testament Establish?

Begin with Luke 22:14–20 and 1 Corinthians 10–11.

- Bread and cup are identified with Christ’s body and blood.
- Jesus commands remembrance; Paul says the church proclaims his death.
- Paul speaks of participation (koinōnia) in Christ’s body and blood.
- The observance belongs to the life of the gathered church.

Starting question: What did Jesus and the apostles intend Christians to understand and do?

How Did “Eucharist” Become the Name?

From thanksgiving at the meal to the observance and its elements.

NT • AD 30s–50s	Jesus gives thanks; the rite is practiced.
Didache • c. 70–120	Eucharistia used for Christian thanksgiving meal.
Ignatius • c. 110	Established term for the observance.
Justin • c. 155	Term also applied to the food and drink received.
Later centuries	Used for celebration and elements; “host” names bread.

How Did the Supper Become an “Offering”?

Early Christian writers applied sacrificial language to thanksgiving.

Didache (c. AD 70–120)	Calls the gathering’s pure offering a sacrifice; cites Malachi 1.
Justin Martyr (c. AD 155)	Links Eucharistic thanks and prayers with acceptable sacrifices.
Irenaeus (c. AD 180)	Develops an offering of created gifts, including bread and wine.

A sacrificial vocabulary developed early; what exactly was being “offered” varied by writer.

Does Scripture Support the Supper as Sacrifice?

Distinguish explicit commands from later theological inference.

What the New Testament says	What the inference adds
• “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19) • Proclaim the Lord’s death (1 Cor. 11:26) • Participate in Christ (1 Cor. 10:16) • Offer praise and thanksgiving (Heb. 13:15)	• Malachi 1:11 as prophecy of the Eucharist • The bread and wine themselves as an offering • The Supper as a sacrifice offered by the church • A required doctrine derived from these analogies

Discussion: When does a reasonable inference become a doctrine Scripture does not expressly teach?

Early Views: What Is Received at the Table?

Three second-century witnesses, before technical medieval definitions.

Ignatius • c. 110	Identifies Eucharist with Christ’s flesh in an anti-Docetic argument.
Justin • c. 155	Describes it as more than ordinary food; connects it with Christ’s flesh and blood.
Irenaeus • c. 180	Speaks of earthly and heavenly realities; links the meal to bodily resurrection.

They speak strongly of Christ’s body and blood but do not supply one technical explanation.

From Mystery to Explanation

Theological vocabulary grows, AD 350–850.

Ambrose • late AD 300s	Consecration brings a change by divine power.
Augustine • early AD 400s	Rich language of signs and participation in Christ.
Paschasius • AD 831	Emphasizes identity with Christ’s historical body.
Ratramnus • c. AD 843	Emphasizes sacramental signs and spiritual reception.

The debate increasingly concerns HOW the visible elements relate to Christ’s body and blood.

When Interpretations Became Requirements

The Berengar controversy, AD 1059–1079.

AD 1059 • Physical language

- Berengar was required to affirm a formula.
- It spoke of Christ's body being broken and chewed by the faithful.
- Later writers found the wording overly physical.

AD 1079 • Substantial change

- A later confession required a "substantial" conversion.
- Bread and wine are said to become Christ's true body and blood.
- This anticipates later transubstantiation language.

The issue became not only what was believed, but what church authority required.

Transubstantiation Becomes Doctrine

The Fourth Lateran Council, AD 1215.

What changes

- The substance of bread becomes Christ's body.
- The substance of wine becomes Christ's blood.
- The change occurs through consecration.

What remains

- The perceptible qualities remain bread-like and wine-like.
- Taste, appearance, texture and other properties persist.
- The explanation uses substance / accidents distinctions.

Lateran IV used "transubstantiated" in 1215; Aquinas elaborated; Trent reaffirmed (1551).

Luther vs. Zwingli: “This Is My Body”

Two Reformers, two readings of the words of institution.

Martin Luther • bodily presence

- Jesus said “is,” not “represents.”
- Bread and wine remain.
- Christ’s body and blood are truly received sacramentally.

Huldrych Zwingli • memorial

- “Is” can be figurative language.
- Bread and wine signify Christ’s body and blood.
- Remembrance and faithful confession are central.

Question: Does “is” describe the bread’s reality or what the bread signifies?

Marburg, 1529: Unity Stopped at the Table

October 1529 — Philip of Hesse convenes leading Reformers.

14

articles agreed

1

unresolved article

Article 15: disagreement over Christ’s bodily presence in the Lord’s Supper.

Their dispute remained despite broad agreement on other Reformation teachings.

Calvin: Real Participation, Spiritually

John Calvin (1509–1564) develops a distinct Reformed explanation.

The ascended Christ

His human body remains in heaven



Holy Spirit unites believers to Christ

Believers at the Lord’s Table

Bread and wine remain; believers genuinely receive Christ through the Spirit and faith.

Four Major Understandings Compared

The central disagreement is how Christ is present and received.

Roman Catholic	Lutheran	Reformed (Calvin)	Memorial (Zwingli)
Bread/wine change in substance	Bread/wine remain	Bread/wine remain	Bread/wine signify
Body and blood truly present	**Body and blood received sacramentally**	**Christ received spiritually by faith**	**Remember and proclaim Christ**

All appeal to Scripture; they differ over the nature and means of Christ’s presence.

Return to Scripture: What Did Jesus Intend?

Separate explicit apostolic teaching from later theological explanations.

REMEMBER	Luke 22:19 — “Do this in remembrance of me.”
PARTICIPATE	1 Cor. 10:16 — Sharing in Christ’s body and blood.
PROCLAIM	1 Cor. 11:26 — Proclaim his death until he comes.

What does Scripture require us to believe — and what remains interpretation?