

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 26:26 - 26:30



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discussion, Steve Gregg delves into Matthew 26:26-30, emphasizing the significance of the Communion scriptural practice in Christianity. He highlights the symbolism behind the wine and bread, which when consumed, represent the blood and body of Christ respectively. At the same time, he argues that the old covenant made at Mount Sinai had become obsolete, being replaced by a new covenant with God. Gregg also touches on the unity between the Swiss and German Reformations and quotes scripture to emphasize his points.

### Transcript

We continue our study in the Gospel of Matthew, turning today to chapter 26 and verse 26. Jesus is, at this point, in the upper room with his disciples, involved in the Passover feast, the last one that he would have with them. He has just predicted that one who is there at the table would betray him, with obvious reference to Judas Iscariot.

And it says in verse 26, Now this is a very abbreviated account, of course, of the Passover meal and the instituting of what we usually call the Lord's Supper or the communion meal. Some traditions call it the Eucharist or have some other name for it. When Jesus handed out the bread and said, this is my body, and handed out the cup of wine and said, this is my blood.

Now, the significance of this particular few sentences has been the subject of great dispute. In fact, not a few denominations have separated from previous associations and started their own group over nothing so much as the nature of this event. Because, of course, Christians not only believe that this happened in the upper room, but they believe that Christians keep this also.

Christians, on some kind of regular basis, commemorate this establishing of the new covenant that Jesus did with his disciples in the upper room. And some Christians do it very frequently. The Roman Catholic Church refers to this as the Mass or the Eucharist, and it's possible in the Roman Catholic tradition to take a Mass every morning.

You can go to every day to take a Mass. The early Christians seem to have very possibly

done this on a weekly basis. There are churches today that take communion, as they call it, on a weekly basis.

Others do it once a month. And some, like the Presbyterians, do it four times a year. The Jews themselves took Passover just once a year.

And one could argue that the keeping of this communion might be most scriptural if it was done once a year at Passover. But there's really no law given by Christ or by the Apostles telling us how frequently this should be commemorated. And it would seem that no church could be said to be disobedient on the basis of how frequently or infrequently they take the Lord's Supper.

But most Christians, the only exceptions I can think of offhand would be the Quakers, most Christian groups do believe in taking communion on some kind of periodical basis. And to do so to remember, as Jesus said, His body and His blood. Now, the exact nature of what transpires for the believer when taking this communion is a matter of real dispute among some.

The Roman Catholics believe that when Jesus said, This bread is my body, and when He said, This cup, this wine, is my blood, that He was being quite literal. And that when you take the Mass or you take the Catholic Eucharist, you are actually drinking the body or eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus. The doctrine of Catholicism on this is called transubstantiation, which one might guess from the nature of that word, it means change of substance, a transfer of one substance into another.

And that doctrine holds that what is originally just a piece of bread actually becomes the body of Christ. What actually originally is just wine in a cup actually becomes the blood of Christ. So that those who participate in this ordinance are drinking and eating the literal body and blood of Christ.

That something supernatural happens with it. Now, Martin Luther, as we know, sought to reform many things associated with Roman Catholicism. And one of the things where he did not agree with the Catholic tradition was in this very matter of transubstantiation.

He did not believe that the body and the blood that we take are the literal body and blood of Jesus. Or I should say he did not believe that the bread turns into the body and that the wine turns into the blood of Jesus. But he believes something not too dissimilar to that.

He believed Luther's view is called consubstantiation. And that would mean that the prefix con means with. And so consubstantiation would be with the substance.

And Luther's view was that the actual body and blood of Jesus exist with the substance of the bread and the wine. And as it was put, the real body of Christ is above and below and through and around the bread. And so when you take the bread, you actually do

take the body of Christ too.

Although the bread does not become the body of Christ literally. And the same thing with the wine. So this view of Luther was not very much different than the Catholic view.

It was just maybe in the mind of the Lutherans somewhat less superstitious. And Zwingli, who was the reformer in Switzerland at the same time that Luther was in Germany, had many things in common with Martin Luther. And actually at one time they considered merging their movements, the Swiss Reformation and the German Reformation, and sort of teaming up.

And Luther and Zwingli met to discuss doctrinal matters, and they almost were ready to join forces except over this matter. Zwingli believed that the bread and the wine were simply a memorial of the actual body and blood of Jesus. Luther was much stronger on it, much more like the Roman Catholic in his viewpoint.

And this difference was so great and held to be so important that the two separated and did not work together. After that they did not cooperate together in the reformations in their two countries. So you can see how interpretations of this have really become important to certain people.

It seems to me, and I can't say that I'm right for sure because a lot of people have had different opinions, but it seems to me that the taking of the meal is not literally taking the body and blood of Jesus, in spite of the fact that Jesus said, this bread is my body, or this wine is my blood. That is a very important thing. Martin Luther, in his meeting with Zwingli, actually was very adamant and pounded the table and said, but it says this is my body and this is my blood.

And he was adamantly saying that the Christian, when he takes the Eucharist, actually is eating the body and the blood of Jesus. However, that does not succeed in taking into account the figure of speech that is almost certainly being used by Christ. As he sat at the table, there was no part of his body or his blood that had left him when he handed out the bread and the wine.

His body was still intact there where he reclined at the table, and his blood was all still in his veins. He had not shed his blood yet. And therefore, when he said this cup is my blood, it certainly is unreasonable to assume that his blood, which had not yet even been shed at that moment, had now come to be in that cup, and that the bread was his literal body.

If this was the only way of understanding his words, then we could take it as such, and of course, we would just have to say, well, this is a mystery and a miracle. However, there's no reason that we have to take his words that way. It is very common to speak in the way he spoke when you're speaking of a representation of a thing.

For example, if you have a family portrait and somebody comes over to your house, and you've got your parents and your grandparents and lots of relatives that your friends have never met in the portrait, and you point to each one in the picture and say, now, this is my grandmother, and this is my grandfather, and this is my father's father and mother, well, of course, you're pointing to a piece of paper, a photograph, and you're saying, this is my father, this is my mother. Well, of course, everyone knows that that isn't really them. That's a piece of paper that has their image stamped upon it, or not stamped, but developed upon it.

And everyone understands that when you say, this is my father and this is my mother in this picture, that you are not talking about that literal picture is your father or literally is your mother, but rather the representation of your father and mother are there on the picture. Or when you're looking at a map, and you're trying to give someone directions, and there's these different ink lines on the map, and you say, now, this is Main Street here, and this is Interstate 84, and this is, you know, this dot over here is the city of McMinnville. Well, that's not really true.

That dot isn't the city of McMinnville, and those lines on the map are not really those streets and those highways. They represent them, but we speak all the time as if, you know, this is that and this is that, and here's the city park and here's that. Now, what we mean, of course, we mean for people to understand that when we say, this is that, that we mean this represents that, this corresponds to that.

And there's every reason to believe, I think, that that's how Jesus was using the expression, this is my body, this represents it right here, and this is my blood, this represents my blood. Now, more important than that whole issue, at least in my mind, is what was going on here. We could get all tied up in ritual things or mysterious theological things, but, you know, the real issue is what was Jesus doing, and why is this an important meal, and what is it that we're doing when we take this meal? If we go to church, whether we do it once a week, once a month, or less frequently than that, or more frequently.

I think the best way to understand it is by appeal back to something in the Old Testament. Back when God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt and brought them to Mount Sinai, and gave them the Ten Commandments and several other ordinances and statutes besides, we read in the 24th chapter of Exodus that Moses came and wrote and read all these words of the Lord to the people of Israel. And the people agreed to keep the words.

They said, all that the Lord has said we will do and we will observe. And it says in verse 5, or 4 and 5, that Moses set up an altar to offer a sacrifice to the Lord. And it says in verse 6, this is Exodus 24, 6, And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar.

Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people, and they said, all that the Lord has said we will do and be obedient. And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you according to all these words. Then Moses went up also, Aaron and Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel.

And they saw the God of Israel, and there was under his feet, as it were, a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity. But on the nobles of the children of Israel God did not lay his hand, that is, he didn't kill them, although they saw him. So they saw God, and they ate and drank.

Now what's interesting about this to me, and important, is that when Moses sprinkled the people with this blood from this sacrifice, he said, Behold, this is the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you. In the upper room, according to Luke's wording of the situation, Jesus said, This cup is the blood of the new covenant. The wording is very similar to that of Moses.

This is the blood of the covenant. This is the blood of the new covenant. You see, there was an old covenant, and there's a new covenant.

The old covenant is that which God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. And he established that covenant with a sacrifice, and with blood, sprinkling of blood, as a matter of fact, on the people. And he said, This is the blood of the covenant.

By receiving this sprinkling, after having said, We will obey everything God said, these people agreed to come into covenantal relationship with God. It says in 1 Peter 2 that we, who are Christians, have been elect for obedience and the sprinkling of blood. It says that, 1 Peter 1-2, it says that we are elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Holy Spirit, unto obedience and the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.

Notice these people said, We will obey, we'll be obedient, and then the blood was sprinkled on them. The idea is that something has happened to Christians in the new covenant that corresponds with what happened to the Jews in the old covenant. There was a covenant meal.

Representatives of the Jews, their leaders, went up, 70 of them went up on the mountain, and they had a meal. They ate and drank in the presence of God. And this was sealing the covenant.

It's a little bit like a wedding covenant. In fact, God in later prophets likened what happened at Mount Sinai to a wedding, that God married Israel. Israel was like the bride and God was the groom.

And we have weddings today, of course, and we don't sprinkle the bride and groom with

blood, but we do have a ceremony. There are vows of fidelity and loyalty that are taken, just like there was here. And in most cases, there's also a meal.

And this is sort of a traditional way in which covenants are established. But when Jesus was with the representatives of the church in the upper room and said, This cup is the new covenant, the blood of the new covenant in my blood, we see that he is doing something that corresponds as a counterpart to what Moses did here, that there were representatives of Israel who had a meal, they saw God, and they received the conditions of the covenant and the sprinkling of blood. Jesus met with representatives of the church.

They had a meal. They saw the God of Israel, too, because Jesus in that same upper room said, If you've seen me, you've seen the Father. And they ate a meal to consolidate and confirm a covenant they were entering into.

This is a new covenant that replaced the old one. Now, having observed that, let me point out that the Jews, forever after this, commemorated this covenant when they kept Passover once a year. And they ate a meal, a ritual meal, once a year at Passover time, and they commemorated this covenant.

You know, married couples, after marriage, sometimes have a tradition of going out to eat on their anniversary to commemorate their marriage covenant and to reaffirm that they're glad to be in that covenant relationship with each other. It's not necessary that there be a meal at the anniversary, but it's interesting how it is somewhat customary. It is a memorial meal, remembering the wedding day, the wedding meal they had.

The Israelites kept Passover each year to commemorate the beginning of the covenant God made with them. And Christians, when they take communion, if we call it that, are commemorating the beginning of a new covenant that was established by Jesus and his people through our representatives, the apostles. Jesus established the new covenant.

And this new covenant was that which was spoken of by Jeremiah the prophet. God, of course, speaking through Jeremiah, said in chapter 31 of that great book, beginning at verse 31, Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord.

Notice he's referring back to the Sinaitic covenant at Mount Sinai. He made a covenant with them, and he refers to it as a marriage covenant. He says, I was a husband to them, though they broke my covenant and they were a treacherous wife.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says

the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they all shall know me from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.

This is what Jesus said he was instituting with his disciples. Jeremiah had spoken of it five or six hundred years before the time of Christ, and Jesus now, with his disciples, says this is it. This is the new covenant that was predicted.

I'm now establishing it with you. And this covenant was to replace the old covenant altogether. There are many Christians who are confused about the old covenant, and they somehow feel that we have some obligations also with reference to that old covenant, even though we now have a new covenant with God established by Christ with his disciples in the upper room.

But in fact, the old covenant is replaced and obsolete because of the new. We are told that in Hebrews chapter 8, where about half of the chapter, about half of chapter 8 of Hebrews is occupied with a quotation, a lengthy quotation from Jeremiah 31, which I just read about God promising to make a new covenant. And once the writer of Hebrews has quoted this, he says at the end of the chapter in Hebrews 8.13, he says, Now, in speaking of a new covenant, he has made the first one obsolete.

And he says that which is obsolete is about ready to vanish away. In other words, the old covenant made at Mount Sinai is old and obsolete. And at the time the writer of Hebrews was writing, he said it's about ready to vanish away, a seemingly obvious reference to the fact that the temple would soon be destroyed by the Romans and bring about an end to all of the trappings of religious worship, according to the old covenant style.

And that because God had made a new covenant with his people. And that new covenant was made by Jesus in the upper room. You know, there are still people, Jewish people, who, you know, they cherish the old covenant and they cherish the special privileges that accrued to them as the people of God under that covenant.

But the new covenant has supplanted it. It's made the old one obsolete. And it's not as though the Christians dreamed up this idea.

This was their own prophets. Jeremiah predicted that there'd be a new covenant. And Jesus simply came and he fulfilled it.

Remember, Jesus said, I didn't come to destroy the law and the prophets. I came to fulfill them. Well, he fulfilled that one in the upper room when he made this new covenant with the people of God.

And now and ever since when the church takes the bread and the wine to commemorate

this, it is a commemoration of covenantal loyalty to God. Does it impart special grace to take these elements? Well, many people believe it does. I'm not aware of anything in the Bible that says that it does.

Some people have taken Jesus' words in John chapter 6 to suggest that you actually obtain more grace through the taking of the sacrament, that you receive life through it. Because Jesus said, he that eats my flesh and drinks my blood will have life. And those who don't will have no life.

And yet, when Jesus in John chapter 6 talked about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, notwithstanding the great similarity in words to those that he gave here in the upper room, he was almost certainly not referring to the sacrament, not referring to communion. And one of the ways we would know that is, of course, that no one there would have possibly understood him to mean that. Even his disciples could never have understood him to mean that, since he had never yet offered his body and blood, as it were, through the elements of bread and wine.

He was rather, in that case, I believe, talking figuratively and talking about the need to receive him wholly, as if one was eating, like we receive food into our bodies. Someone had to receive him into their hearts, receive him as their Lord and his words as their law. Because Jesus, later in that same discussion in John chapter 6, in verse 63, said, the words I speak to you, they are spirit and they are life.

In other words, I'm not speaking to you in literal terms about my physical body and my physical blood, but rather I'm speaking to you in spiritual terms. And he said also in that same place, he said, it's the spirit that gives life, the flesh profits nothing. That's right after he said, you have to eat my flesh.

But then he says, well, my literal flesh doesn't profit you, it's the spirit that does. And the words I speak to you, they are spirit and they are life. So really, there is no teaching that I can find in scripture that says that we can, that some spiritual benefit is conferred to us by taking these elements.

It is rather a memorial to remind us that we are in a covenantal relationship, just like when a married couple on their anniversary go out to eat, we're saying we are still covenanted and we do not want to forget it.