
The Lord's Supper in Early Mormonism

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On June 22, 1836, Joseph Smith escorted his mother, Lucy Mack Smith, and aunt Clarissa to Painesville, Ohio, where these sisters would await their husbands' return from a mission to the eastern states. Upon arrival, Joseph "broke bread" and administered the Lord's Supper "after the ancient order."¹ The company then ate and drank until "they satisfied their appetites." According to George Q. Cannon, former member of the First Presidency, in the early years of the Church between 1830 and 1844, the "bread and the wine were not passed as is the custom now among us. It was an actual supper." He believed that "this would be the proper manner to administer this ordinance now if circumstances permitted"; however, congregations apparently outgrew this approach.²

Other aspects of the ordinance also underwent significant refinement since the first formal and official instructions in the Articles and Covenants of the Church, now section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants. This early revelation did not outline the Lord's Supper in great detail, leaving most of the procedural aspects and understanding of the ordinance open to influences

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from Joseph Smith's and other early leaders' religious backgrounds and cultural surroundings. As a result, the sacrament was irregularly and inconsistently administered during the first years of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

This paper is an effort to understand what the Lord's Supper meant to early members as well as an attempt to piece together—from the Doctrine and Covenants and other early records—the order and sequence of distributing the bread and wine in the LDS Church between 1830 and 1844.³

Background

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper was a ceremonial meal, instituted and celebrated by early members of the LDS Church in accordance with Jesus' instructions at the Last Supper as documented in the New Testament. With the disciples gathered, Jesus broke pieces of bread, pleading with his brethren to eat "in remembrance of [him]" (Luke 22:19). He then similarly distributed the wine. As instructed, the Apostles and early Christians sought to observe the Lord's Supper following Jesus' death (see 1 Corinthians 11:26–30).

However, the meaning and sequence of the ordinance underwent significant alterations following the death of the early Apostles. For example, Cyril, a bishop in Jerusalem around AD 350, believed the Holy Ghost descended "upon the bread and wine at the prayer of the celebrant, and change[d] them into the body and blood" of Jesus. Another early theologian, Irenaeus, was convinced the bread and wine literally transformed each communicant, making their bodies "no longer corruptible."⁴ Other ideas regarding the physical performance of the ordinance surfaced over the centuries and created diverse methods of administering the emblems. During Joseph Smith's youth, for example, religions differed in their interpretation and procedure of the ordinance. The Catholic Church taught transubstantiation, a belief that communicants "miraculously ingest the literal body and blood of Christ, although the outward appearance of the emblems . . . remain the same."⁵ Some faiths, like the Methodist Church, had unique procedures during the "commemorative ordinance," and its members physically "approached the communion-table" rather than receiving the emblems in the pews.⁶ Some feasted on bread and wine, while others shared small servings. Several faiths honored the sacred rite only once a month, some even less frequently.

With the vast amount of interpretations of the Lord's Supper, as well as limited instructions on the ordinance in Joseph Smith's revelations, early leaders in the LDS Church seemed to incorporate aspects from their previous faith into the administration of the sacrament. These Latter-day Saints, for example, referred to the ordinance by several names, including the Lord's Supper, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, "breaking bread," Communion, and the Eucharist. It took many years for all members to universally term the ordinance "the sacrament," which was what the Lord called it in Joseph Smith's revelations (D&C 20:46). Likewise, even after the Lord taught Joseph that "it mattereth not what ye shall eat or what ye shall drink when ye partake of the sacrament" (D&C 27:2), wine was still regularly used until the early 1900s.⁷ Thus it was not until second or third generational members of the Church when the ordinance evolved into what it is today. Perhaps the most significant differences in the sacrament during Joseph Smith's lifetime from how we now administer it were in the procedure, frequency, and meaning of the ordinance.

Procedure

Only some of the pattern for performing the ordinance was outlined in section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants, but members filled in where there were gaps. For example, verse 46 called on priests to "administer the sacrament," which was a broad term for overseeing and directing the preparation, blessing, and distribution of the bread and wine. However, who exactly carried out these duties was open to question.

Preparation. It is unclear who regularly prepared the sacrament during Joseph Smith's time. Even women could have been involved, since they helped prepare the emblems and care for the linens on sacrament tables after the migration to Utah.⁸ However, without formal instructions in Joseph Smith's revelations, the duty likely rested on more spiritually mature members of the Church who held the ordinance in high regard, such as members of the Quorum of the Twelve or the First Presidency, including Joseph Smith himself.

Blessing. According to the Doctrine and Covenants, elders or priests were responsible for blessing the sacramental emblems (see D&C 20:46), yet higher ranking officials, usually members of the Quorum of the Twelve or traveling missionaries, officiated at "the sacred desk" and offered the blessings

on the bread and wine.⁹ They were “mouth” for the rest of the congregation, and they kneeled (see D&C 20:76).¹⁰ However, there’s reason to believe the prayers given in section 20 to bless the bread and wine were not initially recited verbatim.

This idea of an unscripted sacrament prayer was reflected in one of Brigham Young’s sermons after the migration to Utah. In his address, President Young stressed the importance of using the prescribed blessings in the Doctrine and Covenants, saying, “Take this book and read this prayer.” He continued, “The people have various ideas with regard to this prayer. They sometimes cannot hear six feet from the one who is praying, and in whose prayer, perhaps, there are not three words of the prayer that is in this book, that the Lord tells us that we should use.”¹¹

This was further evidenced in missionary reports printed in the *Times and Seasons*, an early Church periodical. Some of these accounts sounded as though there were no set sacrament prayers.¹² Interestingly, however, according to Richard Bushman, perhaps the most notable scholar in Mormon history, Joseph Smith’s revelations were printed so that they were “carried around by Church members.” In fact, Joseph even said that members “snatched” his revelations “as soon as given.”¹³ Thus the instructions on the sacrament in section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants, then chapter 24 of the Book of Commandments, were apparently available and circulating among members despite the destruction of their printing press, persecution, and continuous uprooting. Still, it seemed priesthood holders officiating at the sacrament table incorporated aspects of the Lord’s Supper from their previous faiths, in which there was sometimes no prescribed prayer for blessing the bread and wine.

Methodist preachers and circuit riders at the time, for example, “laid aside” their books and prayed extempore when blessing the emblems of the Lord’s Supper. Even though Methodists themselves had prescribed blessings on the bread and wine, they believed “they could pray better, and with more devotion while their eyes were shut, than they could with their eyes open.”¹⁴ Moreover, many of the early Latter-day Saints who would have likely assisted in the sacrament had been converted from Methodism, such as Brigham Young, John Taylor, Oliver Cowdery, David W. Patten, Thomas B. Marsh, Orson Hyde, and George Q. Cannon, among others. It wasn’t until the early

1900s—when young men began officiating at the sacrament table—that the prayers were read “just as the Lord has given them.”¹⁵

Passing. As with the preparation of the sacrament, it is uncertain who regularly distributed the bread and wine throughout the congregation. Probably more than anyone else, “the twelve apostles passed the emblems of the Lord’s Supper” in large meetings.¹⁶ However, in some accounts, the sacrament was passed by “Presidents,” referring to the First Presidency and Aaronic Priesthood leaders, such as Newel K. Whitney.¹⁷ Even Joseph Smith sometimes “assisted” in “distributing the Lord’s Supper to the Church.”¹⁸

Though the bread would have required multiple men to pass it among those in attendance, the wine was poured in a “common cup” from which every member and nonmember of the Church sipped, regardless of age, health, gender, or social standing. This goblet was taken from the sacrament table to the pews, where the communicants themselves passed it “along the row to others.”¹⁹ Thus it seems those distributing the emblems only carried the cup from the communion table to the first row.²⁰

Years later, Heber J. Grant, then President of the Church, explained that there was “no rule in the Church” that only priesthood holders could distribute the emblems among the pews. It had become only “custom” for men to perform this duty, which practice developed during Joseph Smith’s lifetime. Apparently Grant had “no objection” to “brethren lacking priesthood” to participate in the ordinance if there were no ordained men available.²¹ Not only was the sacrament administered varyingly as such, but it was infrequent as well.

Frequency

The Lord’s Supper was administered for the first time in the Church of Christ on the day the Church was organized—April 6, 1830—when about thirty men and women gathered “to partake of bread and wine in the remembrance of the Lord Jesus” (D&C 20:75). It was on a Tuesday. The next best reference to the sacrament came three months later at the first general conference of the Church, held on June 9, 1830, a Wednesday. Moreover, Sunday was not designated as the day to meet and administer the sacrament until August 1831, a year and four months after the organization of the Church (see D&C 59:9). In the meantime, members were counseled to “meet together often” and administer the ordinance (D&C 20:75). However, because of persecution and

continuous uprooting, the sacrament was only distributed when occasion permitted, which was apparently sporadic, according to early records.

Even after the Lord commanded members to “offer up [their] sacraments upon [his] holy day” (D&C 59:9) in 1831, the ordinance was not regularly administered until the completion of the Kirtland Temple in 1833. Before the construction of temples, according to Hyrum Smith, there was “a great deal of difficulty” with distributing the bread and wine.²² Members had been meeting in either inadequately small homes, one-room schoolhouses, or outdoors, where weather concerns often caused setbacks in the sacrament. Wintertime was especially challenging due to inclement conditions. However, the temple in Kirtland and later Nauvoo provided members sufficient shelter and space to administer the ordinance to large numbers “on every Sabbath.”²³

In places besides Kirtland and Nauvoo, however, members and missionaries continued to administer the Lord's Supper only when conditions were right. For example, members of the Church in Iowa upheld the ordinance “every second Sabbath.”²⁴ This pattern of performing the sacrament more frequently at the Church's headquarters than outlying areas continued after the migration to Utah, when the emblems were distributed in community-wide meetings at the Salt Lake Tabernacle until the “country wards” finally constructed their own meetinghouses and leaders emphasized the sacrament in individual units.

Also unique to the early years of the Church, the sacrament was customarily the last item of business in each meeting. Leaders often spoke either leading up to or during the ordinance, with the distribution of the bread and wine as the climax and conclusion of the meeting. Wilford Woodruff, then member of the Quorum of the Twelve, said it “closed the labor of the day.”²⁵

Meaning

The sacrament held a slightly less prominent position in Latter-day Saint worship during the early years of the Church. Not only was it administered infrequently, as explained above, but the ordinance apparently took a backseat to sermonizing and establishing Church government, which were the focus of worship services during Joseph Smith's lifetime. This idea was symbolically reflected through the communion table in the Kirtland Temple, which was a drop-leaf extension on one of the pulpits—not a standing fixture of its own. C. Mark Hamilton, an architectural historian, even pointed out

that “the sacrament table was typically not a major physical feature [in early Mormon architecture]” and that “the pulpit was the main focus of the interior.”²⁶ This layout suggests, at least early on, that preaching held more honor in the Church than formal liturgy. However, members still considered the sacrament an important institution, and its meaning in early Mormonism was expressed in Emma Smith’s 1835 hymnbook.

This first Latter-day Saint hymnal certainly “represent[s] the doctrines taught by Joseph Smith” and includes five songs under the heading “On Sacrament.”²⁷ William W. Phelps, an early member of the Church, wrote one of the sacrament hymns, while Emma borrowed the remaining four from other faiths, particularly the Methodist Church. Although these hymns could be considered a sung sacramental prayer, three of the five did not mention bread or wine but rather “taught and exemplified the sufferings of Christ.”²⁸ Thus the Lord’s Supper was a “token of . . . fellowship” with Jesus Christ and held “covenantal obligations” for communicants to remember him. By so doing, according to Brigham Young, one could receive “fresh strength” to thwart Satan’s temptations.²⁹

Furthermore, early members heavily emphasized the importance of partaking of the emblems worthily. In fact, according to available records, the most Joseph Smith ever spoke on the sacrament was after the funeral of Seth Johnson in February 1835, when he warned against dishonoring the ordinance: “Previous to the [sacrament] administration, I spoke of the propriety of this institution in the Church, and urged the importance of doing it with acceptance before the Lord, and asked, How long do you suppose a man may partake of this ordinance unworthily, and the Lord not withdraw His Spirit from him? How long will he thus trifle with sacred things, and the Lord not give him over to the buffetings of Satan until the day of redemption! The Church should know if they are unworthy from time to time to partake, lest the servants of God be forbidden to administer it.”³⁰ And they did. On at least one occasion, members “did not break bread because there was such a general division in the Church.”³¹ This idea of withholding the sacrament because of disunion among members became more common after the migration to Utah.

Early leaders also accepted a literal interpretation of the Apostle Paul’s teachings in the New Testament (see 1 Corinthians 11:26–30) and preached that partaking of the sacrament unworthily resulted in severe penalties,

including “sickness and even death.”³² For example, Wilford Woodruff later remembered how Lyman E. Johnson stood in the aisles of the Kirtland Temple and cursed Joseph Smith prior to the blessing of the emblems. When the bread was passed throughout the congregation, Johnson partook of it and turned completely “black in the face.”³³ Woodruff, among other early leaders, taught that anyone who defamed the sacrament immediately and literally “ate and drank damnation to himself.”³⁴ There was no way to “escape condemnation,” George Q. Cannon warned.³⁵

Perhaps members were so cautious in partaking of the sacrament worthily because the ordinance not only provided a moment to reflect on the life and sacrifice of Jesus but also precluded great spiritual outpourings. For example, when the sacrament was distributed at the Kirtland Temple dedication, the “sacred ritual thrilled the congregation” and was followed by a “sensation very elevating to the soul.”³⁶ Some of the attendees attested to seeing “great manifestations of power,” including the administration of angels.³⁷ On another occasion, immediately after Joseph Smith helped administer the sacrament, a “vision was opened” unto him and Oliver Cowdery.³⁸ Occasionally, the sacrament meeting even included “confessions and rejoicings,” but more often than not, it resulted in a “refreshing time” or “solemn meeting.”³⁹

Conclusion

Within the last half century, Latter-day Saints have witnessed the standardization of the sacrament from an inconsistent and infrequent procedure in the 1830s to one of the most regular and important forms of worship in the LDS Church. This all stemmed from Joseph Smith’s revelations, found in the Doctrine and Covenants, which did not bring with them extensive instructions regarding the meaning and method of administering the ordinance. Instead, early members were left to incorporate aspects of the Lord’s Supper from their various religious backgrounds.

Over time, however, leaders of the LDS Church clarified the meaning of the Lord’s Supper and improved its procedure. Now the sacrament is regarded by some—even Presidents of the Church—as the most sacred ordinance administered in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁴⁰

Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 2:447.

2. George Q. Cannon, "Editorial Thoughts," *Juvenile Instructor*, January 15, 1897, 52–53.

3. The closest research on the Lord's Supper in early Mormonism comes from William G. Hartley, who chronicles the history of the priesthood. He touches on different aspects of the sacrament, but only to briefly illustrate the refinements in Church government and priesthood organization.

4. Cited in Milton R. Hunter, "The Common Source of Religious Truth," *Improvement Era*, March 1940, 149.

5. Paul B. Pixton, "Sacrament," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1244.

6. J. H., *A Wesleyan Methodist's Thoughts about Prayer, the Bible, the House of God, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the Covenant, My Ministers, My Class, Home, My Master, My Servant, My Country, Giving, Sorrow, Sickness, and Death* (Toronto: Wesleyan Book Room, 1839), 10–11.

7. *Church, State, and Politics: The Diaries of John Henry Smith*, ed. Jean Bickmore White (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 570.

8. William G. Hartley, *My Fellow Servants: Essays on the History of the Priesthood* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2010), 70.

9. *History of the Church*, 2:435. It was also common for "traveling elders" in the Methodist church to "preside at the Lord's Supper." Sarah D. Brooks, "Reforming Methodism, 1800–1820" (PhD diss., Drew University, 2008), 97.

10. It was not uncommon for those officiating at the sacrament table to "kneel with the church" (D&C 20:76). In fact, some entire LDS congregations kneeled during the sacrament prayers until the late 1800s.

11. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 16:161.

12. In several accounts in the *Times and Seasons*, missionaries wrote that a blessing on the sacrament was offered, whereas in later records such as the *Journal of Discourses*, scribes generally wrote that *the* blessing on the sacrament was offered.

13. As cited in Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 130.

14. As cited in Fred Hood, "Community and the Rhetoric of 'Freedom': Early American Methodist Worship," *Methodist History* 9, no. 1 (October 1970): 13; see also Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 119–20.

15. Even in the 1890s, "deviations were sometimes permitted." See George Q. Cannon, "The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper," *Juvenile Instructor*, August 15, 1897, 53; see also Charles W. Penrose, "The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper," *Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, December 3, 1908.

16. As cited in Thomas G. Alexander, *Things in Heaven and Earth: The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, A Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 50.

17. *History of the Church*, 2:435; see also *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 274.

18. *History of the Church*, 2:435.

19. David L. McDonald, "The Individual Sacrament Cup," *Young Woman's Journal*, April 1912, 217.

20. This chalice, which was a symbolic representation of union among believers in Jesus Christ, lasted about eighty years until the early 1910s, when individual cups became standardized. James R. Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 4:269.

21. Quoted in William G. Hartley, *My Fellow Servants: Essays on the History of the Priesthood* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2010), 64.

22. *Times and Seasons*, August 1, 1844, 596–97.

23. *History of the Church*, 2:408

24. *Times and Seasons*, December 1, 1844, 725.

25. As cited in Susan Staker, *Waiting For World's End: The Diaries of Wilford Woodruff* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 362.

26. C. Mark Hamilton, *Nineteenth-Century Mormon Architecture and City Planning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 164.

27. Mary D. Poulter, "Doctrines of Faith and Hope Found in Emma Smith's 1835 Hymnbook," *BYU Studies* 37, no. 2 (1997–98): 34, 45.

28. *Times and Seasons*, April 15, 1844, 500; see Kaimi Wenger, "Women and the Sacrament," *The Times and Seasons Blog*, July 9, 2007, <http://timesandseasons.org/index.php/2007/07/women-and-sacrament/>.

29. See also John S. Tanner, "Sacrament Prayers," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1245; Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:2–3.

30. *History of the Church*, 2:204.

31. *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836*, ed. Jan Shipps and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1994), 141.

32. Joseph F. Smith, "Partaking of the Sacrament," in *Collected Discourses*, vol. 2, 1890–1892, ed. Brian H. Stuy (Burbank, CA: B. H. S., 1988), 367; see also *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, vol. 2, ed. Jerreld L. Newquist (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 155.

33. Wilford Woodruff, "The Power of Evil," in *Collected Discourses*, vol. 4, 1894–1896, ed. Brian H. Stuy (Burbank, CA: B. H. S., 1991), 290. Lyman E. Johnson later drowned himself in a river, which Woodruff attributed to his partaking of the sacrament unworthily.

34. Woodruff, "Power of Evil," 290.

35. As cited in *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, ed. Jerreld L. Newquist (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 2:155.

36. As cited in Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 172; "Autobiography of Truman O.

Angell," in *Our Pioneer Heritage*, comp. Kate B. Carter (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1967), 10:198.

37. George A. Smith, in *Journal of Discourses*, 11:110.

38. *History of the Church*, 2:435.

39. *Journals of William E. McLellin*, 99, 117.

40. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 34.