

Breaking of Bread

This area of the first church seems to be the most confusing of the four. What does “breaking of bread” mean?

At first thought, it seems to be speaking specifically of the weekly communion service or Lord’s Supper, where the participants break bread and drink of the cup.

But then, you immediately see Acts 2:46-47:

So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

Here they were clearly breaking bread daily and “from house to house.” So maybe the “breaking of bread” was referring to meals together in each other’s houses. After all, we must remember that Jerusalem had been filled with people from all nations and that 3,000 of them had become Christians at one time. They were away from home and probably running out of supplies.

Acts 2:44-45: Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

Obviously, a lot of sharing of food, supplies, and lodging was taking place in this new church.

So, what then was the “breaking of bread”? Was it the Lord’s Supper or just daily meals? In all probability, it was both. We believe that the Lord’s Supper in the first-century church was often a part of an agape (or love or fellowship) meal. The members would be eating together and stop in the middle of the meal and eat the unleavened bread and drink the fruit of the vine in remembrance of Christ and of each other.

Yes, I said “and of each other.” The Lord’s Supper is not just a remembrance of the Body of Christ on the cross but also the Body of Christ present today in the form of His church. It has been accurately said that the Lord Supper has a vertical component in fellowship with God and a horizontal component in fellowship with each other.

I attended an assembly recently where members were encouraged to move about the worship center during the communion to partake of the emblems with others. It was very effective.

In any case, there were some great results from the “breaking of bread” from house to house.

Acts 2:47: ... praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

Wow! What powerful results come from spending time with people!

The Breaking of Bread?

The Bible uses the expression “breaking of bread” in different ways. First, Acts 2:42-46 describes the early church breaking bread as part of their fellowship: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." The early Christians came together regularly for common meals, which included the breaking of bread. Acts 2:44 refers to them having “everything in common,” and this no doubt included sharing meals together, each one receiving from the others what they needed. Verse 46 describes them breaking bread in their homes.

Another type of breaking of bread is that observed at the Lord's Supper or Christian communion. During the Last Supper, described in 1 Corinthians 11:23-29, Jesus took a loaf of bread and broke it and gave it to His disciples, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” The breaking of bread at that first communion table has been re-enacted down through the centuries as a way of remembering that first celebration of both His sacrifice on the cross and the institution of the New Covenant in His blood (v. 25). Henceforth, each celebration of the Lord's Supper includes the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the cup of the fruit of the vine.

Another significance of the broken bread is the symbolism of Christ, the Bread of Life, being broken on the cross for our sin. At the first communion in the upper room, Jesus describes the breaking of the bread in these terms: “This is my body, broken for you” (1 Corinthians 11:24). Although not a bone of Jesus' body was broken on the cross (John 19:31-33, 36; Psalm 34:20), His skin and flesh were torn and broken by blows with rods and fists, by whippings and scourgings, by thorns, nails, and spears. His body and soul were divided from each other by death, and by that brokenness, we are healed (Isaiah 53:5). As His people, we participate in His sufferings and brokenness, being broken by sin as He was broken by the punishment He willingly received for our redemption. “And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16).

~Got Questions

Breaking Bread

Paul said to the Corinthians, "The cup of blessing which we bless is it not the communion [or fellowship or sharing] of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion [or fellowship or sharing] of the body of Christ?" (1Corinthians 10:16).

The memorial supper is not about food for the fleshly body. It is about symbolizing and remembering the flesh and blood of Jesus as the sacrifice for our sins. Unfortunately the Corinthians had lost this distinction, and introduced the feeding of the stomach into the observance of our Lord's memorial supper.

Paul writes to the Corinthians about how they have turned the Lord's Supper into something else, namely a common meal, and even that was done contrary to the spirit of sharing or fellowship. Paul's response was sharp: "What! Don't you have houses to eat and drink in?" (1Corinthians 11:17-22).

Paul insisted that when the congregation comes together for the Lord's Supper, they "break bread" according to the Lord's instructions when he instituted the Lord's Supper. They were not to bring foods for the stomach to the Lord's Supper. When they did, it was no longer the Lord's Supper they were observing. If they were "hungry" and wanted to "break bread" in the form of a common meal, they should do that at a separate place or time, not when they came together to eat the Lord's Supper (1Corinthians 11:22-34).

Paul's teaching to the Corinthians shows that he sees a clear distinction between partaking of the Lord's Supper and eating common food. Both might be called "breaking bread," and both might be done in fellowship, but they are separate activities with quite different purposes.

The disciples in Troas "came together on the first day of the week to break bread" (Acts 20:7). At that gathering Paul, ready to depart "the next day", preached until midnight. Euytchus fell out the window and Paul healed him. Then, after Paul "had broken bread and eaten", he talked until daybreak when he departed (Acts 20:11).

Here again the use of the term "break bread" appears to refer to both the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7), and an ordinary eating of food (Acts 20:11).

I say that, because it seems very unlikely that the Lord's Supper would be postponed till after midnight—even if it were still the first day of the week. (Some say "the next day" (Acts 20:7) just means "in the morning" and the story is told in Jewish time. That is to say "the first day of the week" started at sundown and continued through midnight and daybreak).

In these events at Troas, even though Paul ate his food in the same place where he had observed the Lord's Supper, there is no suggestion that he was mixing the two or blurring the distinction we've seen him make to the Corinthians.

There are many situations where we might need to worship together observing the Lord's Supper and later eat a meal together in the same place. But there is no need to do so in a confusing manner that blurs the distinction we have discussed in these notes. We will manage to keep the Lord's Supper distinct from food for the stomach, if that distinction is clear *in our minds*.

~Ron Graham, Simply Bible

“Breaking Bread” on the “First Day” of the Week

As the apostle Paul was making his way toward Jerusalem near the end of his third missionary journey, he met with several disciples in the coastal city of Troas. Although he was “hurrying to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the Day of Pentecost” (Acts 20:16), he tarried in Troas for seven days with several other disciples (20:4-6). According to Acts 20:7, “[O]n the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.” Since Luke indicates that Paul did not break bread until after his lengthy lesson and the resurrection of Eutychus (20:11), many have questioned whether Paul and the disciples ate of the Lord’s Supper on Saturday, Sunday, or Monday? Others have wondered whether “to break bread” in Acts 20 even has anything to do with the Lord’s Supper. What can be said about such matters?

Admittedly, to “break bread” in Bible times often referred to the eating of common meals. God once warned His prophet Jeremiah not to “**break bread** for the mourner” (Jeremiah 16:7, *RSV*). Jesus “took **bread**...and **broke it**” with the disciples to whom He appeared on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:30,35). The early Christians are said to have continued daily “**breaking bread** from house to house” eating “food with gladness and simplicity of heart” (Acts 2:46). Paul once “took **bread** and...**broke it**” and instructed his 275 companions on board a ship to Italy to eat it for their “preservation” (Acts 27:34-35, *NASB*). In ancient times, to “break bread” was a figure of speech known as synecdoche where a part (to break bread) was put for the whole (to eat a common meal, regardless of the kind of food and drink consumed).

In New Testament times, however, the phrase “to break bread” was also used to describe the partaking of the Lord’s Supper. Jesus instituted this special supper while celebrating the Feast of Unleavened Bread with His disciples shortly before His death.

And as they were eating, Jesus took **bread**, blessed and **broke it**, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is My body.” Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom” (Matthew 26:26-29, *emp. added*).

In 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, Paul addressed the subject of the Lord’s Supper with these words: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The **bread which we break**, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread” (*emp. added*). Paul later reminded the Corinthians of the night in which Jesus first instituted this memorial feast, saying, “For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took **bread**; and when He had given thanks, He **broke it** and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me’” (1 Corinthians 11:23-24, *emp. added*). Because part of this memorial supper that Christians are commanded to keep involves the actual breaking of bread, the expression “to break bread” was used in reference to the Lord’s Supper in the early church (cf. Behm, 1965, 3:730). Similar to how this phrase was used as a synecdoche in regard to common meals, it was also used to represent the Lord’s Supper (where consumption of both the bread and the fruit of the vine is referred to as simply “the breaking of bread”).

Because the phrase “to break bread” refers both to common meals and the Lord’s Supper, one must examine the context of passages in order to understand which one is being discussed. For example, since in Acts 2:42 “breaking bread” is listed with other religious activities carried out by the church such as teaching, praying, and fellowshiping (from the Greek *koinonia*, which may include several aspects of “joint participation,” including free-will offerings on the first day of the week—cf. Romans 15:26; 2 Corinthians 9:13; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2; see Jackson, 2005, p. 31), one may logically conclude that “**the breaking of bread**” is a reference to the early Christians partaking of the Lord’s Supper. [The use of the article in this verse also leaves the impression that a particular event is under consideration, rather than a common meal where “food” (Greek *trophe*, a word never used of the Lord’s Supper—Barnes, 1956, p. 59) is served for the purpose of gaining nourishment (e.g., Acts 2:46; cf. 1 Corinthians 11:33-34).]

But what about the use of the phrase “to break bread” in Acts 20:7? What textual indicators are present that warrant the phrase in this passage to be understood as the Lord’s Supper? First, the term “to break bread” is a first aorist active infinitive (Robertson, 1997). Since infinitives in Greek and English denote the objective or purpose of action for the principal verb (cf. Mounce, 1993, p. 298), one can know that Paul, Luke, and the disciples at Troas “gathered together” for the primary purpose of “breaking bread.” When this information is processed in light of the fact that Paul earlier had written to the church at Corinth and implied that the purpose for them coming together was to partake of the Lord’s Supper (in an orderly manner—1 Corinthians 11:20,33), then the passage in Acts 20 makes much better sense: “to break bread” was (or at least included) the eating of the Lord’s Supper. What’s more, Paul remained in Troas for **seven days** despite being in a hurry to get to Jerusalem before Pentecost (which was about 31 days, 10 stops, and 1,000 miles away—cf. Acts 20:6,13-16; 21:1,3,7,8,15). Why tarry in Troas for seven days? It was not simply to eat a common meal with the saints. Rather, Paul desired to worship with the church in Troas “on the first day of the week,” which included observing “communion” with them (1 Corinthians 10:16).

But did Paul and the church at Troas really observe the Lord’s Supper **on Sunday**? First, it is possible that the bread Paul broke after spending all night preaching and talking was part of a common meal that he would have gladly received before beginning his extended journey to Jerusalem. Nevertheless, when Luke’s terminology in Acts 20:11 is carefully examined, it appears that Paul ate two separate meals with the disciples: the Lord’s Supper first (“had broken bread”), followed by a common meal (“and eaten”). This latter expression (“and eaten,” Greek *geusamenos*) “is nowhere used of the celebration of the Supper, whereas in Acts 10:10 it is applied to taking a common meal” (Jamieson, 1997). The former expression (“had broken bread”) has the Greek article before “bread” (lit., “had broken **the** bread,” ASV, emp. added) and “seems plainly to denote the celebration of the Lord’s Supper; their intention to do so being expressed in Acts 20:7, but their actually doing it nowhere if not here” (Jamieson, 1997; cf. Robertson, 1997; Woods, 1976, pp. 67-70; Wycliffe, 1985).

If Paul, then, waited to “break bread” until after midnight (20:7,11), would this not have been a Monday-morning observance of the Lord’s Supper? Regardless of whether the memorial feast was observed before or after midnight, one can be assured that it took place on Sunday, because it was “on the first day of the week” that the disciples met “to break bread.” The reason that eating the Lord’s Supper after midnight would have been acceptable conduct for many Christians is because the Jewish method of counting time was still widely acknowledged. The Jews and the Romans used different standards for calculating the hours of the day, and although both systems split the day into two periods of twelve hours, a new day for the Romans began at midnight (cf. Pliny, n.d., 2:79), whereas a new day for the Jews began in the evening at sundown and lasted until sundown the following day. Luke, like Matthew and Mark, used the Jewish method of reckoning time in both his gospel account and in the book of Acts (cf. Luke 23:44; Acts 2:15; 23:23; cf. also John 19:14; 20:1,19). Thus, Paul’s pre-midnight preaching corresponded to our Saturday evening, but was the beginning of their “first day.” Regardless of whether they observed the Lord’s Supper on the evening of the first day or the morning of the first day, it was observed on the proper day, the day on which Jesus rose from the grave (Luke 24:1)—the first day of the week.

Christians should count it a privilege and honor to observe the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:22), and commune with the Lord and His people (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). Sadly, some in the twenty-first century may attempt to justify observing this sacred supper on some occasion other than the first day by alleging that the early Christians observed it on Saturday night or Monday morning. The important thing to remember in this discussion, however, is that the early disciples came together **on the first day of the week** to observe this memorial feast. In the first century, when the Jewish method of reckoning time was still widely accepted, the first day began on what we call Saturday evening and ended Sunday evening. In the twenty-first century, most (if not all) people count time from midnight to midnight. Since God did not specify which method of time to use, but did specify the numerical day of the week in which the supper of the Lord is to be kept, Christians should abide by the standards of time wherever they reside.

~Eric Lyons, Apologetics Press