

TABLE TALK

Official Publication of the LMS-USA
...these words... shall be upon your heart; you shall teach them... and talk of them... Deut. 6:6,7



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The Early Church

There are so many ideas today as to what might constitute a legitimate church. These concerns might have to do with any of a variety of issues such as the meeting place itself, the size of the worshiping community, the style of worship, the music, the form of leadership and training of pastors among other things. In all of this it may be well that, from time to time, consideration be given to the church in its beginnings. What did the church look like and how did the church function in the first years of its existence?

There are a number of things we do know about the early Christian church. For one thing, we are certain of its beginning. The birth of the Church took place fifty days after the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the dead. It was that Pentecost, seven weeks after the feast of the Passover during which our Lord was crucified, that the disciples, when gathered together in Jerusalem, experienced the pouring out of the Holy Spirit – described as tongues of fire on their heads, enabling them to speak the good news of Jesus Christ in all the languages of those who had come to Jerusalem for

the Passover festivities (see Acts 2). That fearful band of disciples was transformed into apostles (i.e., persons charged with a high mission) who went out to give testimony to



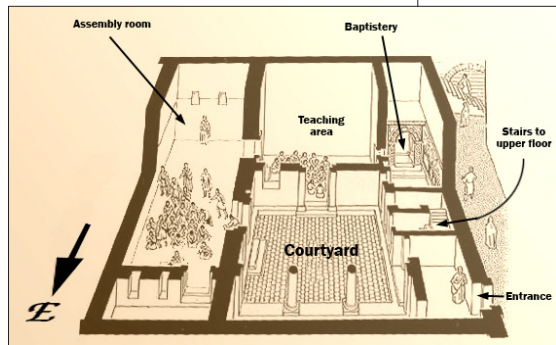
The Dura-Europos house church, ca. 232, with chapel area on the right.

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their faith to all the world.

Those who embraced the message of the apostles made up the Christian community called the "church." The Greek word is ecclesia, the "called out." These men, women, and children were called out of their former lives into a new community. Acts 2:44-47 describes this community: *"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and dis-*

his home (Phlm 2b). Church hostess Lydia was a prosperous business woman who sold expensive purple fabric and could afford servants (Acts 16:14). A church met in the home of Aquila and Priscilla, a couple employed in the evidently lucrative first-century trade of tent-making (Acts 18:1-3). Gaius, a man with the means to generously support missionaries (3 John 1-5), had a home big enough to host the sizable Corinthian congregation (Romans 16:23). According to Yale University archaeologists, "The first Christian congregations worshiped in private houses, meeting at the homes of wealthier members on a rotating basis . . . Worship was generally conducted in the atrium, or central courtyard of the house."



Layout of a typical house church

tributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." (esv)

As to where... as to the place... of these church gatherings [the following is an excerpt from the website - <https://ntrf.org/first-century-house-churches/>], scripture indicates the early church met in the private homes of its more affluent members. Philemon, wealthy enough to own a slave, hosted a church in

Less well known is the fact the early church continued this practice of home meetings for hundreds of years after the New Testament was completed. Graydon Snyder of Chicago Theological Seminary observed that "the New Testament Church began as a

small group house church (Col. 4:15), and it remained so until the middle or end of the third century. There are no evidences of larger places of meeting before 300." Again quoting Snyder, "there is no literary evidence nor archaeological indication that any such home was converted into an extant church building. Nor is there any extant church that certainly was built prior to Constantine."

The first house church we have record of is that recorded for us in Acts 1:13. This is where the disciples of Jesus met together in an "Upper Room" of a house following our Lord's ascension. For the first

three centuries of the church, known as Early Christianity, Christians typically met in homes, if only because intermittent persecution (before the Edict of Milan in 313) did not allow the erection of public church buildings. Clement of Alexandria, an early church father, wrote of worshipping in a house. The Dura-Europos church

[the church pictured on pages 1 and 3], a private house in Dura-Europos in Syria, was excavated in the 1930s and was found to be used as a Christian meeting place in AD 232 with one small room serving as a baptistry. [see - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_church]

Worship in the Early Church

What did worship look like in the early church? During the first several decades, most of the Jews who had come to believe in Jesus Christ as their Messiah and Savior, when possible, continued to worship in their local synagogue and at the Temple. This is what we see in the book of Acts. However, first generation Christians easily realized that since synagogue worship

sing psalms and new hymns, and have the agape meal or “love feast”. This meal was a regular meal that included bread and wine with the spiritual symbols invested in them, much like the Jewish Pass-over Meal.

For centuries there was debate about the order of a typical Jewish synagogue worship. Historians and students of worship had accepted some basic facts about their worship based upon extra-biblical materials. As historians and archaeologists have uncovered ancient synagogues in recent years, they have learned more about the buildings and all that was connected to them.

The synagogue, which faced east toward the rising of the sun and Jerusalem, was considered a place for the assembly; hence the name. It was a multi-purpose center for Jews and God-fearers (people wanting to convert to Judaism). Hence, it would function much like old American town halls where court would take place, the city leaders or elders would conduct business, town meetings would be held, a school for boys would use it during the week, etc.

For some Jewish communities



Interior of a First Century Synagogue at the time of excavation

neither practiced the two main rites or sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper established by Jesus, nor taught the story and words of Jesus, they had to have another day to do so. Sunday was the obvious day, since it commemorated the light and life of Jesus Christ. These early Jewish Christians would meet on the “day of the Lord” to pray, read Scripture, be taught by the apostles or elders,

this multipurpose facility also served as a community food bank, a treasury (an early banking system), a hostel with a room or two for traveling guests, and/or a place for the wounded or infirm.

If the community did not build another facility, as some did, then the place would be turned into “the house of prayer” on the Sabbath. For the Jewish people, the concept of prayer was much broader than merely petitioning God for things. Prayer, especially in the context of the community, was a time for communion with God, which meant it was a time of worship.

We now know that the house of prayer was a place arranged to host the rabbis, elders and the congregation on their Sabbath days. Often the exterior of the building itself was basic and bland, but the interior of the meeting hall was well decorated and furnished with items that reminded the worshipers of God’s holy Temple. Therefore, they would have a special box for the scrolls of Scripture, a menorah or lampstand, baskets of grains and fruit to represent firstfruit offerings, a table with a basket or bowl of twelve loaves of bread, and so forth.

During the Sabbath, this house of prayer was a place that held prayer services morning, noon and night. Then there was a time when the general community would gather to engage God with praise, prayers, with the reading and the teaching of the Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament), and then be dismissed by God with a closing blessing. Interestingly enough, Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is written in that order.

We also know that some synagogues allowed women, but they had to stand in the back or off to the side, while the boys and men sat in the front. They used a liturgical calendar; systematically read-

ing pre-selected Scriptures from the Law and the Prophets. It is quite probable that when Jesus read and then interpreted the Scriptures, as we find him doing in the Gospels, he did so based upon those preselected passages.

The Scriptures, housed in a special box, were ceremoniously carried to the reading lectern. The official, sometimes called the president (since he presided over the service), would read the selected portions of God’s Word. All would stand during the reading out of reverence for God’s Word. Other men, who were of age and recognized as priests or rabbis could also read Scripture and then explain what was meant. Evidence suggests that the readers and teachers would sit while teaching while the audience stood. We see this practice in Ezra and Nehemiah.

From the research we can see what the order of worship looked like. This order of worship was adopted and practiced by the early church:

The Greeting – a more formal, biblical greeting or salutation.

A Response – the attendees would respond, often with a Scripture that was recited in unison or chanted.

Readings and Psalmody – Several passages of Scriptures would be read or chanted, interspersed with a responsive singing or chanting of a Psalm.

Psalms – the Psalms, considered God’s hymnal, were sung or chanted, most of the time without instruments.

Message – an elder, rabbi or teacher would interpret and explain the relevant meaning of the Scripture(s) that were read.

Prayer – prayers would be offered on behalf of the people. The Jews considered prayer as an act of sacrifice, and therefore pleasing to God. It was common to weave

various portions of Scripture into the prayers.

Benediction – this was a formal blessing from God by his Word upon his people.

As the membership of the early Church grew, more and more non-Jewish converts were swelling the ranks and outnumbering the Jewish believers. At the same time, Jewish people and leadership were becoming hostile toward Christians, declaring them to be a blasphemous sect. The opportunities for Christians to worship and to witness in the synagogues quickly diminished.

Believers understood the biblical mandate and the need to worship God in Christ on a weekly basis. The first generation Christians in Jerusalem and other Jewish epicenters naturally worshiped in synagogues on the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday) and on Christ's resurrection day (Sunday). God communicated through the apostles and prophets that Christ's church was God's new covenant people who lived in God's new covenant era. The old covenant, filled with the old biblical ceremonies and Sabbaths were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He brought a revolutionary new day. Worship would be rightly observed on Christ's day (Sunday), in the Spirit and Truth.

Jewish believers practiced family worship, while their communities would gather for corporate worship in a public place, such as the synagogue. Gentiles, influenced by Roman culture, worshiped in various settings and on a daily basis. There were plenty of gods and goddesses to appease and pay tribute. The gods Roma (goddess of the culture of Rome) and Caesar (recognized as a man-god) were deities whom all the people had to pay tribute.

But, local villages, towns and cities had their own gods; and each family, (called "households," who were composed of the patriarch-grandfather, his sons and families, and slaves) also worshiped at given times and places. It was common for the households to pay tribute to their god or goddess in their homes during a mealtime. In the absence of the patriarch, the matriarch would preside over the obligatory ceremony in the home.

In the first hundred years after Jesus' resurrection, the Church added more former gentiles than former Jews. It was natural, being influenced by their cultural practices, to hold worship in the homes. The common notion that Christians worshiping in homes is the God-ordained practice for worship is just plain silly. Worshiping in houses was a cultural act, not a holy act. It was an ingrained tradition that Jesus neither condemned nor required. As the body of believers grew in a town or city, they would seek out homes of believers that could accommodate as many people as they could. Much like today, necessity or convenience would often drive the decision as to where to meet. Archaeologists have uncovered large house compounds that had dedicated room(s) for corporate worship. They have also discovered former public buildings



**Gathering on the Lord's Day
for worship and fellowship**

that were converted for worship and used as Christian teaching centers. The idea that places of worship were sanctified by God, also grew out of the gentile and Jewish cultures; but the idea was never sanctioned by Christ and his New Testament.

Like the Jews who had a very special annual feast that a Hebrew family would observe (the Passover), and like the gentiles who worshiped while having their feasts or meals, it was natural for the first generation of Christians to celebrate Jesus during a common feast that incorporated Christ's new Supper. Whenever believers did so, it was called the Love (Agape) Feast. With the understanding that believers were members of a new family in Christ, these feasts were not merely restricted to those related by blood, but to those related by faith in Jesus Christ.

Children, youth and slaves of their father or patriarch were obliged to have at least a formal commitment to the deity(ies) of the patriarch, so they also participated in the religious practices of the family. This practice did not change when heads of households became Christians. However, when an individual became a believer in Jesus Christ, sometimes they would continue their own family's religious tradition, but also participate in the weekly worship with their new family in Christ. The dynamics or conflicts that came about were different for each family.

As we have seen, when the Church gathered on Sundays for worship, they learned from the apostles and prophets an order of worship that was adopted from the Synagogue liturgy. Yet, that worship, while focusing on God the Father, did not take into consideration Jesus Christ. The Love Feast ceremony (very simple and with a meal) fulfilled the need and obliga-

tion to worship Jesus. When believers moved from two days of worship to one day of worship on Sunday, they blended the two services. Worship then was done in two parts.

For many reasons, Christians allowed anyone to participate with them during the first part of the service. This was known as "the assembly" and "the Service of the Word." However, because the second part was a special time and a religious feast reserved only for those who were confirmed members (catechized and baptized) of Christ's family, the Church excluded non-members from participating. An opportunity was given during the first part, often before the sermon, for inquirers and unbaptized new disciples (called catechumens) to leave.

It is said that sometime in the middle of the 200s that churches added a formal part of the liturgy called "The Peace." It followed the Service of the Word and prefaced the Service of Thanksgiving. To some it appeared to be a time of intermission. Yet it was more than that. It was a brief period for people to greet one another, and for believers to reconcile with fellow believers if there had been some conflict between them. They did so in obedience to Jesus' words in Matthew 5 and Paul's admonitions in 1 Corinthians 10-14.

The believers would then give each other a "holy kiss," from which the cultural practice of a brief hug with a quick kiss on both cheeks came. You find this "holy kiss" mentioned in the New Testament (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26). It is also mentioned many times by the early church fathers. A time was given for all God's people to kiss each other (even on the lips). It was to convey the work of the Holy Spirit

in bringing strangers together into a holy family, in the bonds of grace, love and unity. It symbolized the breaking down of those cultural barriers of race, nationality, culture, former religion, class, etc. and uniting a people as equal ones in Christ. One can only imagine how counter-cultural and revolutionary this was.

So important was this that the ceremonies of baptism and the Lord's Supper were considered incomplete without the exchange of the holy kiss.

During The Peace those who were not formally part of the church were greeted and then escorted out by the deacons. Sadly, because of a misunderstanding or because people were offended by their exclusion, this gave rise to the rumor that Christians were eating literal flesh and drinking literal blood. Many times leaders of churches were arrested by local authorities for supposedly performing cannibalistic rites.

The second part of the worship was called the eucharist, which meant "the thanksgiving." One could rightly say the early church (and the Church for centuries) celebrated a weekly thanksgiving. The simple order of this part of worship often looked like this:

A greeting – Normally a salutation taken from Scripture.

Response – The congregation would recite a biblical verse they had memorized that acknowledged the wonders and works of an awesome God.

Offering – Sometimes a special time during worship was taken to collect funds in order to support the pastors, teachers and/or evangelists, widows, orphans, and the poor of God's people. Priority was given to Christians who were members of the local church; but money was also collected to support other

churches in different cities. Any additional funds were occasionally used to serve the needy within the local community.

Eucharist Prayer – The president (the elder who presided over the worship) would offer thanks to God for Jesus Christ, and ask God to bless the bread and wine in order to spiritually nourish God's people in the faith.

Communion – This would begin by offering prayers and then offering the elements to God, and ceremoniously breaking the bread. The people would then receive the bread and wine.

Benediction – When all had eaten the bread and drunk the wine, an elder (more often the president) would pronounce a biblical blessing upon God's people.

They were then dismissed.

As time went on, the worship service became more and more elaborate and sophisticated. Trying to teach (usually illiterate) believers about the life and work of Jesus Christ, and about true worship, many church leaders incorporated symbols borrowed from culture and/or from the Old Testament.

The point of this little history lesson on church worship is that from the founding of the New Testament Church, worship has been structured, orderly and sensible. Reading from the early church fathers one gets the clear sense that, for the most part, worship in the first couple generations had a complete and formal liturgy that was filled with reverence and affection for God in Christ. Ideally, it was also an expression of who this new people of God were: Christ-worshippers united together in Spirit and Truth, expressed through grace, love, peace and joy.

Source: <https://imperfectpastor.wordpress.com/2011/02/09/what-worship-looked-like-in-the-early-church/>

The following documents help in gaining an understanding of the church during the time when the pattern of historic Christian worship was being established. Material is used with permission of Laudemont Ministries - www.laudemont.org. Material below is from the article, *Worship In The Early Church*, by Richard L. Leonard. The article can be found at www.laudermont.org/a-witec.htm

The Establishment of Historic Christian Worship

Worship is the central focus of a vital Christian faith, and the most distinctive activity of the church of Jesus Christ. The biblical words translated "worship" (Hebrew *shachah*, Greek *proskuneo*) mean, literally, to bow down or bend the knee. Such was the ancient gesture of honor to a sovereign and superior authority. To worship is to offer the oath of covenant loyalty to the Great King, and to affirm our faithfulness as his servants. For this reason, the worship of God through Jesus Christ lies at the heart of all Christian expression.

The Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles

- First Century -

The *Didache* (pronounced "dee-dah-khay") or "Teaching" is a manual of church order and Christian living from the late first or early second century. The Greek title is "Teaching of the Lord through the Twelve Apostles." The *Didache* was apparently compiled from earlier sources, including material now included in the Gospels. It was rediscovered in 1875. Its importance for Christian worship lies in the fact that it contains the earliest description of the Eucharist outside the New Testament.

The document recommends praying the Lord's Prayer three times daily. It describes how Christians come together on the Lord's Day "to break bread and give thanks," first confessing their sins and being reconciled with their neighbors for a pure sacrifice to the Lord. Only baptized Christians are to partake.

The service of the Eucharist begins with thanksgiving over the cup and the loaf. In offering the cup, the leader gives thanks for "the holy vine of David," apparently a reference to the Messianic community (Psa. 80:8). A doxology, or expression of praise to God, follows: "To you be glory forever." Then the leader gives thanks over the broken bread, thanking God "for the life and knowledge you have revealed through Jesus, your child [servant]," concluding with a doxology. Then follows a prayer comparing the bread to the gathering of the church into the kingdom, again ending with a doxology. The community meal, which comes next, is not described.

After the meal, the leader again offers thanksgivings for the Lord's holy name dwelling within his people, and for God's creative activity and his provision of food and drink for all people. He then prays that the Lord would deliver the church from evil, perfect it in love, and gather it into his kingdom. Each of these acts concludes with a doxology. The service concludes with responses ending with *Maranatha!* Amen, and extemporaneous thanksgivings by the church prophets, who are to be allowed to give thanks (eucharist) in their own way, following no particular text.

The order of worship in the *Didache* follows Jewish forms for "grace" be-

fore and after meals. The leader's prayer does not refer to the body and blood of Jesus; instead, the emphasis is on the gathering of the *church body* (see 1 Cor. 10:17). It is noteworthy that the prayer and thanksgiving are interlaced with doxologies; the event is a praise-celebration of the congregation of God's people. The role of prophets is significant; the *Didache* calls them the church's "high priests," and gives instructions on how to welcome prophets and discern true from false. The document does not specify what sort of church official is to preside at the Eucharist.

Note - a PDF of the Didache can be found at - thedidache.com

The Letter of Pliny the Younger

- AD 112 -

Pliny the Younger (Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, circa 61-113) was a Roman administrator whom the Emperor Trajan had sent to Bithynia, in Asia Minor, to reform the region's finances and court system. Around AD 112 he wrote to Trajan reporting how he had dealt with Christians in his jurisdiction, and requesting the Emperor's further advice. The Christian movement had become strong in the region, for the pagan temples were virtually deserted. But the fact that Christians worshiped in secret gatherings had aroused public suspicion. They were being accused of killing infants, eating human flesh, and having incestuous relations, and were considered atheists because they refused to honor the pagan gods.

Pliny was not sure whether Christians should be condemned for specific crimes, or simply because they professed to be followers of Christ. His first tactic was to ask the accused if they were Christians, and then if they persisted in their Christian confession he had them executed because of their obstinacy. But he changed his policy after large numbers of people began to be accused. When a person was charged with being Christian, Pliny gave them the chance to worship pagan divinities and make offerings to their images, including that of the Emperor, and to curse Christ. Using this procedure, Pliny found many people who admitted to having once been Christians but claimed to have renounced the faith. From them he learned what little he knew about Christian worship.

According to these people, "on an appointed day they had been accustomed to meet before daybreak, and to recite a hymn antiphonally to Christ, as to a god." Then they would take an oath (Latin *sacramentum*) "to abstain from theft, robbery, adultery, and breach of faith." After this ceremony they left, but reassembled later on to eat together.

Although Pliny's knowledge of Christian worship was gained second-hand from people who had abandoned the faith, the general outline is consistent with our other sources and supplements them. We find the Christian community assembling early on the Lord's day, and then gathering to share a meal. One may assume the meal included the Lord's Supper, but Pliny reported he was unable to get much more information about the ceremony even after torturing two deaconesses. The word *sacramentum* referred to an oath taken by Roman soldiers, and its use to describe an act of Christian worship reminds us that worship is basically a pledge of loyalty to the God of the covenant. Finally, Pliny's account is the only one of our sources that

specifically mentions hymns as part of Christian worship. However, since worship in both Old and New Testaments emphasizes "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," we must assume that some kind of singing or chanting — in this case an antiphonal or responsive hymn — was a standard component of worship during the earliest Christian centuries.

Note - a PDF of Pliny's letter can be found at -
<https://4.files.edl.io/c2b8/09/27/18/191227-10ad0963-223f-4f01-9b4e-15c754f93fe5.pdf>

The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus

-AD 220 -

Around AD 200 Hippolytus, a Roman clergyman, composed a manual of church order and worship known as the *Apostolic Tradition*. In this document, Hippolytus describes a Eucharist in two settings: one following the consecration of a bishop, and one following baptism and confirmation.

The Eucharist at the consecration of a bishop begins with the greeting or kiss of peace. Deacons then bring the elements to the bishop, who with other presbyters (elders) lays his hands on them. Introductory responses, still used in many liturgies, are then spoken:

The Lord be with you. **And with your spirit.**
Lift up your hearts. **We have them with the Lord.**
Let us give thanks unto the Lord. **It is fitting and right.**

The eucharistic prayer is longer than in the previous examples. It begins with thanksgiving for the coming of Jesus, the incarnate Word. It proceeds through the narrative of Christ's sufferings through which he abolished death, to the words of Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper and the *anamnesis* (recollection) of Christ's death and resurrection. The prayer concludes with the invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the assembly, and a doxology.

Hippolytus then indicates that if oil is offered as a gift, it is then blessed, symbolic of the anointing of kings, priests and prophets. A doxology concludes the ceremony. If cheese and olives are offered, they are similarly blessed as symbolic of charity and of the free flow from the tree of life, with a concluding doxology.

In Hippolytus' second example, the Eucharist after baptism and confirmation, the ceremony begins with the offering by the deacons of bread, wine, milk, honey and water. During the prayer that follows, which Hippolytus does not quote, the bread is to be eucharistized into the "flesh of Christ" and the cup of wine into his blood. The mixed milk and honey, symbolic of the promised land and the nourishment of Christ, is blessed, and also the water, symbolic of cleansing. The bread, and cups of water, milk and wine are then distributed by the presbyters. The cups are served to each worshiper three times, with the following dialogue:

In God the Father Almighty. **Amen.**
And in the Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**
And in the Holy Spirit in the Holy Church. **Amen.**

In the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, we note that the elements of the Eucharist are viewed as the representation of the flesh and blood of Christ, having taken on this property through the eucharistic prayer. There is now an invocation of the Holy Spirit (*epiklesis*), but it is upon the *people* rather than upon the elements of the Eucharist as in later practice. The church hierarchy shows a greater differentiation; the president is now a consecrated bishop, elevated above other presbyters. There is more elaborate use of symbolism suitable to the different occasions on which the Eucharist is celebrated, but the service of the Word is not mentioned in these examples.

Note - a PDF of the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus can be found at -
http://www.stjohnsarlingtonva.org/Customer-Content/saintjohnsarlington/CMS/files/EFM/Apostolic_Tradition_by_Hippolytus.pdf

Lutheran Worship

Lutheran worship is the public gathering of God's people in Christ's presence around His Word and His special gifts of Baptism, the Forgiveness of Sin, and Holy Communion. Worship is all about God serving us. Lutheran worship has a



distinctive shape, which as we have seen, dates back to the earliest Christians, and which speaks of the God who is with us at our human level serving us. He comes to us in a way that we can hear, see and taste. In His amazing grace, God initiates worship – He gathers us. He forgives us. He speaks to us. He listens to us. He sends us out as renewed people.

God speaks to us as we hear His word of forgiveness and

through the reading of the Scriptures. Each week Lutherans hear from various parts of the Bible, and also a sermon based on the Word of God. God also listens as we pray for the church, the world and each other. God feeds His gathered people through a holy meal of bread and wine, the body and blood of his Son, Jesus. God leaves His presence with His people by blessing them and sending them on their way to be lights for the world.

The above is gleaned from– <https://www.lca.org.au/about-us/how-lutherans-worship/>

Table Talk
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The LMS-USA is Lutheran Church body describing itself as *Biblical, Confessional, Evangelical, Liturgical and Congregational*. It is a 'Forum' in which there is an on going discussion of theological issues and concerns among clergy and lay alike. The LMS-USA meets annually for a Theological Conference and this publication, besides carrying news of the Ministerium and Synod, functions also as a vehicle for this continuing dialogue.

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