

The Lord's Supper

A Biblical Perspective

by *Tim Clark*



“...do this in remembrance of me.” Luke 22:19

Every first-time visitor to an Independent Christian Church/Church of Christ worship service has found himself confronted with the Lord's Supper (along with some very troubling questions). “Who is permitted to participate? What is this part of the service all about? Will some harm befall me if I, do or do not, partake of the bread and juice?” – each of these questions are le-

gitimate; each deserves a Biblical answer.

In order to do the subject justice, we must first survey the field of opinion regarding the Lord's Supper. Having done so, we may then appeal to the final (and ultimate) authority for establishing our understanding– the Word of God.

The Sacraments

Our discussion on the Lord's Supper must begin with a consideration of the term “sacrament”. What is a “sacrament”? Well, it depends on who you ask. Webster's New World Dictionary describes it variously as a “mysterious” or “secret” element of Christian worship that is viewed as a means of grace. For the Roman Catholic, a sacrament is an “effective symbol” that

imparts Divine grace through its performance. Bishop John McKenzie, professor of theology at Notre Dame states: "So behind the sacramental rites, Roman Catholics believe that there is the saving act of Jesus Christ, communicated to the individual Catholic through the performance of a symbolic ritual action." (The Roman Catholic Church, p. 166, Image Books). According to Roman Catholic teaching, the Lord's Supper (or the "Eucharist"), is one of seven rituals able to impart God's grace (the others are: baptism, confirmation, penance, extreme unction, orders and matrimony). In most Protestant circles, only two of these are viewed as "sacramental"—baptism and the Lord's Supper. Additionally, there is debate among Protestants as to the notion of any ritual's ability to communicate God's grace to the participant.

To simplify the above discussion, we can say that there are two major perspectives on the Lord's Supper. Some

believe it to be a means by which God works salvation in the lives of his followers, while others view it as purely symbolic.

The real question before us however, is: "What does the Bible say about the Lord's Supper?". To answer this question, we must turn to no other source than the Scripture itself.

The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper was implemented by Christ himself on the eve of his betrayal (1 Corinthians 11:23). Its establishment came at the end of Christ's celebration of the Passover meal with his disciples—a meal filled with exhortations from the Teacher on such subjects as humility (Luke 22:26), repentance (Matthew 26:21–22) and now, salvation from sin (Matthew 26:27).

The words Jesus spoke to his disciples in the upper room must have seemed confusing at the time. Although Je-

sus had told them of his impending death (and of his betrayal by one of the Twelve), they surely struggled to link these to his declarations that the loaf and cup were harbingers of his crucifixion. Clearly, Jesus meant to communicate to his disciples (both then and now) that the elements of the Supper were designed to bring to mind his sacrifice for our sin.

Some have imagined that the loaf and cup are actually the blood and flesh of Christ. They believe that in the observance of the Lord's Supper there is a sacrificial offering made to God. Such a position defies both logic and Scripture. First, when Jesus instituted the Supper, he was not offering his flesh and blood literally, but rather in a symbolic anticipatory sense—pointing to the real sacrifice he would make in the hours ahead. Second, there is no way in which the sacrifice of Christ can be considered a repeatable event, for Scripture itself boldly proclaims concerning Jesus: "But

when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.” (Hebrews 10:12–14).

So what is the purpose for the Lord’s Supper? Thankfully, Jesus himself spoke in no uncertain terms on this issue: “...do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24–25). As complicated as the arguments surrounding communion have become, it is ironic that its purpose has always been so clearly stated! We must come to the firm conclusion that any stated purpose for the Lord’s Supper, other than the simple one provided by the Lord himself, is nothing more than human fabrication.

The celebration of the Lord’s Supper is more than a simple mnemonic device– it serves as a graphic portrayal of God’s grand

plan for the redemption of man. In other words, the Supper not only reminds us of the sacrificial offering of Christ, it explains many aspects of it as well!

In order for us to more fully understand the implications of the Lord’s Supper, we must first recall its roots.

These roots are to be found in a supper instituted by God over a thousand years earlier as the Israelites prepared to leave their bonds of slavery to the Egyptians. In preparation for the deliverance of His people, God had sent nine separate plagues upon the people of Egypt (blood, frogs, lice, flies, death of livestock, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness) as recorded in Exodus, chapters 7–12. The final plague to be visited upon the Egyptians was the plague of the death of the firstborn of both man and animal. In preparation for this final judgment, God instructed his people to sacrifice and consume a year old male lamb, free from spot or blemish– one for each

household (Exodus 12:5). The blood of the sacrificed animal was to be placed upon the doorframe of each household (Exodus 12:7) as a sign to the death angel that would pass through the land. All such homes, marked by the blood of the lamb, were passed over (hence the term “passover”) by the final plague of death (Exodus 12:13).

It is no coincidence that Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper as a part of his Passover celebration with the disciples. In reality, Jesus was the fulfillment of the Passover! Consider the striking similarities between the Passover observance and the Lord’s Supper. The occasion for the first Passover celebration was the deliverance of God’s people from their bondage to Egypt– Jesus’ Supper was instituted on the eve of our deliverance from slavery to sin. In the Passover, the spotless lamb was sacrificed– In Jesus’ Supper, we remember the sacrifice of the sinless Lamb of God. The homes

marked by the blood of the Passover lamb were spared the plague of death— those whose lives have been marked by the blood of Christ are freed from the plague of the “second death” (Revelation 2:11). The Passover feast was to serve as a reminder of God’s deliverance of his people— of His Supper, Jesus said “Do this in remembrance of me.”.

Every time Christians gather to observe the Lord’s Supper, a proclamation of God’s love is present. Participants are reminded of the seriousness of sin, the graciousness of God, and the victory of Christ over the enemies of sin and death.

Propriety At The Table

In our consideration of the Lord’s Supper, we have yet to answer the questions of who may participate, and how this participation is to be observed. Again, we have the clear words of Scrip-

ture to guide us in these areas.

Ironically, we may find our best instruction in the bad example of the Corinthian church! In 1 Corinthians 11:17ff, we find some very practical teaching on the Lord’s Supper as the Apostle Paul addresses their errors.

The first error to be avoided in gathering at the Lord’s Table is that of division between the brethren (vs.18). Apparently, lines of division had arisen between the more affluent members of the fellowship and their less fortunate brethren (vs. 22). This division was made manifest by the unwillingness of the former to wait for the arrival of the latter before partaking of a fellowship dinner that normally preceded the Lord’s Supper (vs.21). It is this lack of regard that fuels the Apostle’s complaint against the Corinthians and moves him to declare: “For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.”

(vs. 29). For Paul, the Body of Christ was both corporeal (that which was His flesh), and corporate (the Church). To dishonor either at the Table of Remembrance was to invite self-condemnation.

The second great error to be avoided is that of unrepentance. Paul warns against such error by directing that: “A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.” (vs.28). A note of caution must be issued here— Paul is not saying that only the “sinless” may gather at the Table (if this were the case, only Jesus would qualify!). Some have mistakenly come to this conclusion with the help of the unfortunate translation of verse 27 in the King James Version, rendering the NIV’s “unworthy manner” as “unworthily”. Consider the implications of such logic— who among us is “worthy” of God’s grace? The very definition of grace is that of “unmerited favor”! Furthermore, anyone who could qualify

as “worthy” would have no need of a Savior in the first place! Paul’s focus in this direction is simply that the Lord’s Supper be approached with an attitude of repentance, not self-righteousness.

As to the determination of who may participate in the Lord’s Supper, we must conclude this to be a matter of individual discretion. The Lord’s Supper is open to all who consider themselves His disciple. Participation by those who may be unwittingly

outside of God’s grace will in no way send them to judgment more quickly! Quite possibly, it may lead them to more fully consider the One whom the Supper memorializes. This is not to say that the Lord’s Table should be taken lightly, on the contrary, those who would gather before the Lord must do so in deep reverence for the occasion.

In conclusion, it must be stated unequivocally that the Lord’s Supper is not the occa-

sion for sacrifice or the forgiveness of sin. This was accomplished by Christ himself in his death on the cross. The Lord’s Supper is however, the time at which God has called us to reflect upon this sacrifice. For the Christian, it is an opportunity to share in a time of worship with his brethren wherein together, they may praise God for the salvation that is theirs through the work of Christ on their behalf.