

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Christ established His church and placed two ordinances only in it--baptism and the Lord's Supper. An understanding of the meaning and purpose of these ordinances of divine appointment is exceedingly important, for they symbolize and portray in visible form the spiritual significance of Christianity.

We are to consider now the scriptural teachings about the Lord's Supper. The record of the institution of the Lord's Supper is found in four places in the Bible. That we may get the record before us, I read these passages.

"And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." Matthew 26:26-28.

"And as they did eat, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and brake it, and gave to them, and said, Take, eat: this is my body. And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them: and they all drank of it. And he said unto them, This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many." Mark 14:22-24.

"And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you." Luke 22:19

"For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come." I Corinthians 11:23-26.

In approaching the study of this ordinance, it is well for us to note the circumstances of its institution. The place, you remember, was Jerusalem; the time was the evening before the crucifixion of our Lord. In the presence of the eleven disciples, He instituted the Supper. Following its observance, they sang a hymn and went out into the Mount of Olives.

I. What Is The Lord's Supper?

The Lord's Supper is a church ordinance, instituted by Christ, on the eve of His departure, in order that His disciples might have a memento of Him. It is a beautiful memorial service in which we eat a bit of unleavened bread and drink of the fruit of the vine as symbols of Christ's death for us.

The Lord's Supper is an ordinance and not a sacrament. There is a wide difference between the two. An ordinance is a visible sign of an invisible grace. It is simply a symbol setting forth in visible form the spiritual doctrine of grace. It does not confer grace. A sacrament is a channel through which saving grace is imparted. So, when we say that the Lord's Supper is an ordinance and not a sacrament, we deny its procuring power and affirm its declarative function.

II. Whose Is This Supper?

Who instituted this Supper and to whom does it belong? If we are to be governed by the Word of God, there can be but one answer. When our Lord instituted the Supper and gave it to the eleven, His language left no doubt that in every sense it was His: "And I appoint unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath appointed unto me; that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom." Luke 22:29-30. Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul all say that it is the Lord's Supper.

Since it is the Lord's Supper, He alone must prescribe the rules regulating and governing it. It is for Him to make every regulation, specification and limitation concerning it to the end of time. As His followers we are obligated to abide by the regulations that He has laid down for its government. We have no authority or option in the matter. It is not our Supper, but it is the Lord's. Therefore, human sentiment is not to govern it. Long-established customs are not to govern it. Prejudices and feelings are not to govern it. If it were our Supper, either as individuals or as denominations, we might use our pleasure, enforce our own notions and do as we pleased. But the Lord Jesus, Who placed it in His church has sole authority to prescribe every regulation in connection with it. Therefore, we must be governed by scripture and not by sentiment. What Christ taught by precept, and enjoined by example, must never be set aside by the human will.

III. What Is The Purpose Of The Lord's Supper?

Church ordinances are not to be observed as a means of life, but as a memorial of death. They do not purify the candidate or participant, but they preach the gospel to the beholder. They do not procure, but they do proclaim. There are three preachers in the church--the preacher in the pulpit, the believer in the baptistry and the church member in the pew eating the bread and drinking from the cup.

Doubtless the purpose of the Lord's Supper is more generally misunderstood than any other fact in New Testament history. When it comes to studying and discussing this ordinance the average person is governed entirely by sentiment. Tearful sentiment is advanced and expressed and then the position is regarded as established. But, no scripture is ever given to justify this position. Inasmuch as the New Testament is the all-sufficient guide in all such matters, we must not permit ourselves to be guided by feelings, opinions or sentiment.

1. It is a memorial.

The Lord's Supper was designed by Christ for a special purpose. It was to be His memorial, and by this He was to be remembered. And this memorial is unique. It is emphatic in recalling the death of Christ. Other men are remembered by their philosophies or by their disciples. Their birthdays and the anniversaries of their accession to power are celebrated, but in this case the dying hour of One is commemorated. Only one explanation of this fact can be made. Other men accomplished what they did by their lives, whereas, Christ wrought His great work for mankind by His death.

The Lord's Supper is a memorial of His broken body and shed blood. His infinite sacrifice for sin is brought vividly before the believer's eyes in the broken loaf and the covenant cup. Its bread speaks of His broken body: "This is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me." Its cup speaks of His shed blood: "This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me." In both the bread and the cup the Lord's table talks of the Lord's death.

Christ established this memorial, not to His birth, not to His miracles, not to His teachings, not to His holy life, beautiful and worthy as all these were, but to His death. Every time we come to the Lord's table and partake of the emblems in remembrance of Him, we are thereby reminded of Calvary and what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us there. God's great love for sinful humanity was expressed in the death of Christ on Calvary. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on him should not perish but have everlasting life." John 3:16. Another verse which points out the grand truth of it all is Romans 5:8: "But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

The Lord's Supper symbolizes Christ's death, just as a flag symbolizes a nation. When He said, "This do in remembrance of me," He recognized how easy it is for men to forget. So Christ packed into an act as simple as eating and drinking the meaning of His death; a perpetual reminder for the people of each succeeding generation who find it difficult to remember. To think clearly and to meditate deeply on the death of Christ ought to inspire us to more courageous living. He asks that His death shall not be forgotten. He instituted the Supper for the sole purpose of a memorial of His death upon the cross, as the one and only atoning sacrifice for the sins of mankind.

What a sin, then, against our Lord when we forget Him, when we turn His Supper into a social meal, when we observe it in remembrance of each other, when we make of this divine and sacred ordinance a sentimental institution for showing our regard for other people! The Lord's Supper was never given to show our love for one another, as is often claimed. The attempt to show our love in this way is to do so at the expense of God's Word. Proper observance of the Lord's Supper eliminates all thought of human fellowship. It is not to be used as an expression of Christian affection one for another. To think of it as such is to lower its dignity and destroy its real meaning.

The fearful fallacy of making the Supper a love feast has played havoc with scriptural practice in this regard. Great as was His love for His mother, who was in Jerusalem at the time when the Saviour instituted the Lord's Supper, He did not invite her to partake. Neither did He invite any of the other members of His family, nor Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, or any of His other friends. Love for others is good and beautiful, but we do not assemble at the Lord's table to remember each other. Rather, we are to remember Christ only. If our minds are centered on Christ, we cannot think of loved ones or others. It is the one time and place that we are to forget all others and all else except the body and blood of Christ.

2. It is a proclamation.

"Ye do shew forth the Lord's death." The Supper tells the unsaved that Christ died, and that through His broken body and His poured-out blood sinners receive eternal life. It is not the Lord's life that is emphasized by it, splendid as that life was in its unsullied holiness. It is not His teaching that is celebrated, although the world has admitted that as a teacher Christ is without a peer. It was not His power to work miracles that Christ asked His followers to remember, though He went through the world bestowing upon men gifts that could come only from a hand that was divine. It was His death that was to be proclaimed. His death is what is held up to view in the Supper.

Christ's death certainly needs to be proclaimed today. Little thought is given to this subject today. There is not much preaching from the average pulpit in these days which magnifies Christ's death. Instead, there is considerable talk about salvation by character, church membership, good works, keeping the Golden Rule, etc., all of which are offered as a means of salvation, rather than the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Even though men may preach these things, it needs to be remembered by all that the Word of God declares that there is no salvation apart from Christ's shed blood.

The Lord's Supper sets forth Christ's sacrificial and atoning death. As we take the bread it speaks of His body wounded and bruised, of the nails driven through His hands and feet, of the thorns which pierced His brow, of the spear that was thrust into His blessed side, and of the body taken from the cross and lovingly laid in Joseph's tomb. As we take the cup it speaks to us of the blood of Christ, of that crimson tide which cleanses the guilty soul and makes it white as snow.

This ordinance portrays the dreadfulness of sin. Man's sin nailed the Son of God to Calvary's cross. Nothing else did it. There isn't any room at the Lord's table for one who has any sense of his own merit.

The Lord's Supper also portrays the sufficiency of Christ's blood to put away sin. "The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin." At the cross of Christ, and there alone, men have found release from sin. Salvation was made possible only through the death of Christ. After all our wanderings afield we must come back to this fact. At the end of a long illness, the Bishop of Durham was asked what he was thinking about. He replied, "I have been coming back from all my studies to remember that Jesus died for me." Charles H. Spurgeon declared that he had lived by four words, "Jesus died for me," and that he intended to die by them. The Lord's Supper presents to us the Saviour in the act of our emancipation, for we are redeemed with the precious blood of Christ. Precious doctrine of the atonement, the world's only hope!

3. It is a prophecy.

"Ye do shew forth the Lord's death till He come." It is a prophecy of our Lord's return. It not only declares that Christ died for us, but that in the fulness of time He will return to receive His own. Every time we observe the Lord's Supper we proclaim to those who witness our action that Christ is coming again according to His own promise. How we rejoice in the fact that He will come again and reign over us!