

AROUND THE LORD'S TABLE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on September 29, 1968 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:00 P.M.

If we count a generation as the interval of time between the birth of a baby and the time when that baby is grown, married and able to bear children, then we now live in the seventieth generation since Christ. Seventy generations removed from the beginning of the church, we Christians of the twentieth century are eager for every window of insight into the faith and practice of early Christians. While we draw most heavily for our understanding of Christianity upon the inspired scriptures, we also can learn much from uninspired but early church writings.

For example, the writings of Justin Martyr, who lived from 120 to 190 A.D., are rich in showing us how Christians lived and thought a century after the church began. In his famous *Apology I*, in chapters 65-67, we read a description of worship in his day, "Then is brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of water and wine ... When the president has given thanks and all the people have assented, those who are called deacons with us give to those present a portion of the Eucharistic bread and wine and water, and carry it away to those that are absent. This food is called with us the Eucharist, and of it none is allowed to partake but he that believes that our teachings are true, and has been washed with the washing for the remission of sins and unto regeneration, and who so lives as Christ directed ... And on the day which is called the day of the sun there is an assembly of all who live in the towns and in the country; and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then the reader ceases, and the president speaks, admonishing us and exhorting us to imitate these excellent examples. Then we arise all together and offer prayers; and, as we said before, when we have concluded our prayer, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president in like manner offers up prayers and thanksgivings with all his might; and the people assent with Amen; and there is the distribution and partaking by all of the Eucharist elements; and to them that are not present they are sent by the hand of the deacons." Except for the unusually strong emphasis given to the one who presides over the meetings, this account seems to be parallel to the practice that we discover in reading the New Testament itself.

Even Until Now

It is rather thrilling to note how durable and how meaningful this simple memorial meal has been through the centuries. Wherever Christians have gathered for worship down through the ages the Lord's Table has been spread and his Supper eaten. The same is true today after nearly 20 centuries. It is also impressive on any Lord's day to think of the thousands of Christians around the world who are eating the Lord's Supper. A day begins at the International Date Line in the mid-Pacific. This means that our brethren scattered across the islands of the Pacific eat the supper first, followed by Christians in Japan, Okinawa, Korea, Hong Kong, and the Philippines, and Viet Nam. Then, a little later brethren in India, missionaries in Jordan, Israel, Syria, Greece, and thousands of brethren in Nigeria and other African nations eat the Lord's Supper. The same is true of our brethren in Italy, Spain, France, Germany, and England. Congregations along the east coast also precede us by an hour or so, while congregations on the Pacific coast follow later. Around the world Christians assemble every Sunday around the Lord's Table.

As each of us looks back over his life he can remember certain more meaningful meals. Some of these have been especially meaningful because they were shared with members of our families. Upon Thanksgiving or some other special occasion when they come home and the whole family sits down to eat together, it is indeed a special occasion. On still other occasions a meal may have become memorable because of the unusual food. Still other meals are memorable because of the place where they were eaten. But all of this has been said in order that I may now say that the most important meal in each of our lives is the very simple yet very profound Lord's Supper. It is supremely important because of what it signifies.

During the last few years I have asked more than 500 college students to evaluate their own activities in worship. It has been singularly interesting to note that a vast majority of the students indicate that their worship is most meaningful in the eating of the Lord's Supper. In this activity they feel a higher degree of personal dedication to God, and a greater degree of intimacy with God than in any other act. I think you will share something of their feeling. All of us feel the spiritual uplift of this special act of communion with God.

Many years after the church had been established and after the apostle Paul had preached the gospel at Corinth, he taught these first-century Christians to eat the Lord's Supper. Still later, he wrote to them to correct certain abuses and to tell them more perfectly how to eat the Lord's Supper. We find his instructions in I Cor. 11:23-30, as follows, "For I received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed took bread ... in like manner also the cup ... "

In these verses we have the clear indication that the Lord's Supper is a permanent part of Christian worship. We also have clearly stated that there are two elements, and only two, which are to be included in the eating of this sacred meal. First, there is unleavened bread. This means simply bread without yeast. A generation ago a saintly Christian woman wrote this interesting paragraph concerning her manner of preparing the unleavened bread. "Taking the best white flour, I mix it with pure sweet milk, with the cream

still on, putting in nothing else whatever. The cream that is in the milk is sufficient shortening to prevent toughness, yet it is not greasy and does not bake so hard as when lard and water are used. It should be baked rather slowly and should not remain in the oven long enough to become hard.” (*Gospel Advocate*, 1886).

In the second place, there is the fruit of the vine. Since the scriptures do not specify either fresh grape juice or fermented wine, but rather use the expression “fruit of the vine” it is permissible to use either. Justin Martyr in his *Apology I*, p. 65, indicates that it was customary to mix water with the wine. In our day it seems wisest to use grape juice, especially when we remember that some of our young people might be encouraged to acquire a taste for something that would be harmful to them.

We are deeply impressed with the simplicity of the elements which make up the Lord’s Supper. We are also impressed with the beauty of this memorial meal. What else could possibly convey so beautifully the fact that we are to take our Lord into our very beings? We become what we eat in the physical world. Spiritually, this memorial meal suggests the same intimacy in taking Christ into our very beings. We are also deeply impressed with the availability of these elements. They are available to the poor as well as the rich; they are available with some thought and planning, in every part of the world.

Our text continues, “And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, This is my body, which is for you: this do in remembrance of me. In like manner also the cup, after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood: this do, as often as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink the cup, ye proclaim the Lord’s death till he come.”

First, there is the retrospective look: “This do in remembrance of me.” Human beings forget. The Lord’s Supper is a period of ten to twelve to fifteen minutes each Lord’s Day in which we Christians look back to the life of our Lord and contemplate his love and sacrifice for us. It is a time in which we contemplate the very center of our religion. As we remember our Lord our hearts are cleansed and purified and we are lifted up to a higher plane of life. The Lord’s Supper is a living monument. It contrasts with the monuments of stone that have been so impressively built to honor the world’s great leaders. These monuments in stone are cold and life-less, whereas the Lord’s memorial is life-giving. The monuments of men are tied to one place, whereas Christ’s memorial is available wherever a band of Christians chooses to meet for worship.

In the second place, there is the prospective look: “Ye proclaim the Lord’s death till he come.” The Lord’s Supper is to be eaten by Christians, those who not only remember that their Lord died to make possible their salvation, but who also eagerly look forward to his eventual coming again. It is a declaration of faith in the future. If this memorial meal only looked back to the cross and the tomb, it would be sad and sorrowful. However, the fact that it is an announcement of Christian faith for all to see and a constant declaration of faith that the Lord is living and will come again makes it a joyous meal.

The Lord’s Supper is also a marvelous means of teaching the young. As a child in his early years watches his father and mother partake of these emblems, he has a curiosity which leads him to ask what they mean. This affords an opportunity for father or mother to explain Christ’s great redemptive love, and leads the child to look forward to the time when he is old enough to be a Christian and to partake of the Lord’s Supper as his parents do.

#### In A Worthy Manner

Our text continues, “Therefore whosoever shall eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But let a man prove himself, and so let him eat of the bread, and drink of the cup. For he that eateth and drinketh, eateth and drinketh judgment unto himself, if he discern not the body. For this cause many among you are weak and sickly, and not a few sleep.”

These words of warning are written to cause each Christian to realize the seriousness which attends the eating of this memorial meal. It is to be done reverently and thoughtfully, never carelessly and idly. The leader of this portion of the worship should prepare himself carefully in advance. First of all, he should be a good man, lest his life cause others to be disturbed when he leads the worship. He should then spend some hours during the week prior to this important responsibility turning his mind and heart to this great and important opportunity. He should pray thoughtfully, spiritually and specifically for each element of the Lord’s Supper as he offers thanks. First, he offers thanks for the bread, and when it has been served he offers thanks for the fruit of the vine. He should do so in a manner designed to lead each participant to partake spiritually. While leading others, he should make sure that he himself also worships.

Those who have been honored by being invited to serve the congregation should also prepare. First, their preparation should be in life, so that no one will be jarred or disturbed by an incongruity between their ordinary behavior and their serving of the sacred meal. Each person should so live as to be worthy of having this important Christian worship responsibility. During the time of serving the meal they should be reverent and thoughtful. They should be as unobtrusive as possible, in manner and in dress. Finally, they themselves also should worship in the Lord’s Supper as they assist others in worshipping.

During the ten to fifteen minutes of the eating of the Lord’s Supper every Christian should make a supreme effort to be sure that he is worshipping acceptably. Before coming to the house of the Lord, each should prepare his heart and mind for the activities of worship

in which he is to engage. During this interval he should meditate quietly on the life and love of his Lord. He should think of Christ and the sacrifice that made possible our salvation. It is a time for being thankful. It is a time for rededicating one's life to the Lord. It is a time in which one can pray for strength to meet the temptations of the ensuing week. It is a time for parents to ask help in the rearing of their children. It is a time for children to pray for proper respect for parental authority. Hearts are mellowed, cleansed, and strengthened, as they assemble around the Lord's table.

#### The First Day of the Week

In Acts 20:7 we read, "And upon the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul discoursed with them ..." It seems that the apostle Paul had remained at Troas for almost a week in order to have the opportunity of eating the Lord's Supper with the disciples there. Sacred history also bears out the fact that the early Christians ate the Lord's Supper each Lord's Day. Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and others tell us that the supper was eaten weekly during the second century. Our Lord told the apostles that the Holy Spirit would come and would guide them into all truth. (John 16:13). They set the example of eating the Lord's Supper on each first day of the week. This appears to be the "all truth" on this matter. *Erskine's Dissertations* tells us that the Greek church continued this weekly observance until the 7th century. John Calvin and other reformers lamented the decline in the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper as late as the 16th century. Surely we need this spiritual meal each seven days. It is the wise, safe course to do it as the early Christians did, on each Lord's Day.

#### Conclusion

The Lord's Supper calls us back each week to the central facts of the Christian religion. As we assemble around his table the Lord gives us spiritual strength, and cleanses away the evil that has crept into our lives. This sacred meal provides for us the spiritual food which our souls need. We should resolve never to miss an opportunity of eating this spiritual feast. Finally, I would remind you that the Lord's Supper is for Christians only. All are invited to the feast, but only those that are willing to accept Christ as Savior and obey his command are permitted to eat. Obey these simple commands and know the spiritual joy and strength that comes from eating the Lord's Supper.