

THE LORD'S SUPPER

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 3, 1963 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Of the five avenues of worship which are taught in the New Testament, the eating of the Lord's Supper is the most intimate. By its very nature it brings the Christian closer to the Lord than the other acts of worship. We do not say that the eating of the Lord's Supper is more important than any of the other avenues of worship, for each of the acts of worship is distinctive. We do say that the Lord's supper is the most intimate and personal of them all.

It is impressive to remember that for nearly 2,000 years Christians have assembled each Lord's day to partake of this memorial meal. Under many circumstances and in many situations has this been done. Christians have assembled in caves, in hired dwellings, in fine church buildings, on ship board, in open areas and in any other places. They have assembled in large groups and small ones. These exterior incidentals are not important. What is important is the motive that leads man to eat the Lord's Supper, along with the actual act of eating it.

It is thrilling to me to remember that on any particular Sunday thousands of Christians whom I know personally by name and by face are eating the Lord's Supper in various corners of the earth. For example, I know Christians who will eat the Lord's Supper today in more than thirty-five different states of the fifty which make up our nation. In addition, I know Christians who will today eat the Lord's Supper in Canada, Mexico, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, The Philippines, New Zealand, Australia, and several of the smaller nations of Southeast Asia. Moving farther around the globe, I know at least one who will be eating the Lord's Supper in India today, as well as others in Syria, Palestine, Ethiopia, South Africa, Nigeria, and in at least a dozen countries of Western Europe. Likewise, I know a few in Brazil and other scattered countries of South America. On every continent and in more than fifty countries of the world there will be Christians who will pause sometime during this day to eat the Lord's Supper. This is a thrilling and wonderful realization, for it unites us with each other and with the Lord in whose honor we eat.

Justin Martyr

One of the most interesting of the writings of early church leaders concerning the Lord's Supper is that from the pen of Justin the Martyr, who lived from about 100 to 165 A.D. In his *I Apology*, sections lxxv-lxxvii, he used these words, "Then is brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of water and wine. (The president was the presiding officer of the service, usually an elder. Because of the fear that some might become intoxicated by wine, it was the custom to mix water with the wine). And he takes them and offers up praise and glory to the Father of all things, through the name of his Son and of the Holy Ghost, and gives thanks at length that we are deemed worthy of these things at his hand. When he has completed the prayers and thanksgiving all the people assent by saying Amen. Amen in the Hebrew tongue signifies 'So be it.' 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 who 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. For we do not receive them as ordinary food or ordinary drink. The apostles in the memoirs made by them, which are called gospels, have thus narrated that the command was given; that Jesus took bread, gave thanks, and said, This do ye in remembrance of me; this is my body.' And he took the cup likewise and said, 'This is my blood,' and gave it to them alone.

"And on the day which is called the day of the sun (we would say Sunday) there is an assembly of all who live in the towns or 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 altogether and offer prayers; and, as we said before, when we have concluded our prayers, 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 Eucharistic element; and to them that are not present they are sent by the hand of the people. And they that are prosperous and wish to do so give what they will, each after his choice. What is collected is deposited with the president, who gives aid to the orphans and widows and such as are in want by reason of sickness or other cause; and to those also that are in prison, and to strangers from abroad, in fact to all that are in need he is a protector." (Taken from Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, pp. 93-95).

The Scriptures Speak

While these paragraphs from Justin Martyr are interesting, as reflecting the practices of the very early church, it is to the inspired sacred scriptures that we go for the most meaningful information and instruction. On the final night of Christ's public ministry, he was in an upper room in Jerusalem, eating the Passover supper with his disciples. It is in this connection that we read Matt. 26:26-29, "And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and brake it; and he gave to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And

he took a cup, and gave thanks, and gave to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many unto remission of sins. But I say unto you, I shall not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." This is the inauguration of this magnificent memorial meal for Christians of all time. That same evening Jesus was betrayed; the following day he was crucified. Three days later he was raised from the dead; forty days later he ascended into heaven; and ten days later his kingdom was established on Pentecost. For nearly 2,000 years Christians have been communing with the Lord each week through eating of this memorial feast in his kingdom.

We are indebted to Luke, who wrote the narrative of Paul's mission journeys, for telling us that on this third journey Paul stopped at Troas and waited for a period of seven days in order to worship with the Christians on the Lord's day. Acts 20:7 then reads, "And upon the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul discoursed with us, intending to depart on the morrow." The practice in the early church was the regular, weekly observance of the Lord's Supper by all Christians. This is indicated both in the inspired scriptures and even more extensively in the uninspired writings of the early church leaders. It is right that we should continue to follow this practice.

To the Corinthians

Perhaps the most meaningful of all the passages in the New Testament concerning the Lord's Supper is that found in I Cor. 11:23-30. After having established the church at Corinth and having given them oral instructions concerning this memorial meal, the apostle Paul wrote back to them these words, "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; 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." This passage confirms the fact that the Lord's Supper was instituted by the Lord himself just before his betrayal. We also notice that the elements of the Lord's Supper ate unleavened bread (bread made primarily of flour and water), and the cup (called in other places the fruit of the vine, and meaning the juice of the grape, sometimes fresh and at other times of the year in various stages of fermentation). These elements are so simple, so inexpensive, so readily available, and yet so wonderfully meaningful that we are amazed at the wisdom of God in choosing this particular means of perpetuating the memory of Christ and his contribution to our salvation. The purpose of the eating of the supper is declared to be that of remembering Christ, his life, his teaching, his death, his resurrection, and his church.

The next sentence reads, "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink the cup, ye proclaim the Lord's death till he come." Along with the encouragement which the supper affords to remember the Lord, it has a second vitally significant meaning--that of proclaiming that we believe the Lord will come again. The Christian, when he eats the Lord's Supper, is proclaiming to all who may see and hear that he believes in what Christ has done for the salvation of his soul and that Christ will return to call him to an eternal home in heaven. Just as the Passover was a teaching device in the Old Testament, the Lord's Supper is a teaching device in the New Testament. Those who visit our services, as well as our own children who sit beside us, are instructed as they witness the solemn worship of God in the Lord's supper.

Because of the deep significance of the act, the apostle Paul next sounds this warning, "Wherefore whosoever shall eat the bread or drink the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. (His warning is not at this point against those whose lives are unworthy, but against the unworthy eating of the Lord's Supper at the time of eating. It is true that the wayward Christian needs to repent of his sins, make right his wrong, and pray God for forgiveness before coming to the Lord's table, but this passage is talking about the manner of eating). 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." This warning is very clear. It means that no one should eat the Lord's Supper carelessly, thoughtlessly, or irreverently. It should be done seriously and worshipfully, with no whispering, or other activities that would disturb one's own concentration or that of those who sit nearby.

Four Suggestions

In order that the Lord's Supper may be eaten worshipfully, I would make the following four suggestions. First, there should be an appropriate setting. The place where the Christians meet should be as free from interruptions as possible and should be as conducive to worship as possible. There should be no distraction because of heat or cold, excessive light or darkness, extraneous noise and the like. The building ought to be simple enough not to detract from the worship. Since physical surroundings have a great deal to do with our feelings, the building should be planned with worship in mind.

Secondly, there should be adequate leadership. This means that the men who preside at the Lord's table and who pass the supper to the congregation, should be men whose lives are not incongruous with leadership in this important act of worship. During the actual serving of the Lord's Supper there should be complete dedication to the serious business of worshipping and helping others to worship. There should be no whispering, no uncertainty as to the exact duties that one is to perform, nor the section of the audience which one is to serve.

Third, there must be careful preparation of mind on the part of the audience. Worship is not a simple act, but one involving body, mind, and spirit. It is not something that is done to us, but something that we do. It is active rather than passive, so we need to prepare in order to do it well. By thinking of the worship before we assemble, and by careful adjustment of one's thinking during the hour of worship it is possible to heighten the effectiveness of worship. The proper mind-set is essential in the act of eating the Lord's Supper.

Finally, during the actual observance of the supper there should be meaningful meditation. Perhaps an open Bible on the lap, with the deliberate reading of the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, or one of the passages from the gospels, would help. Or, with eyes closed, a contemplation of what Christ means in our own lives would make the supper more meaningful. A review of the events of Christ's life, particularly his death for our salvation, would also be appropriate meditation.

Conclusion

One of the great privileges of being a Christian is that of eating this meal. Let us let nothing come into our lives that would keep us from being ready to enter into this weekly worship experience. Let us look forward to and plan for this occasion, so that it can be a deeply satisfying act of worship, as well as an act pleasing in the sight of God.

To the person who is not yet a Christian, we would only say that we long for you to have the spiritual uplift and stimulus that comes in the eating of the supper of the Lord. Accept Christ by obeying his simple commandments, so that you, too, may enjoy this experience. Believe in the Lord with all your heart, repent of your sins, confess the name of Jesus before men, and be buried with your Lord in baptism. Then, enter into this memorial feast that you may know one of the greatest blessings which God has provided for his children.