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Spiritual Revival and the Lord's Supper

by David Dunlap

The practice of the Lord's supper has fallen on unfortunate times. To many believers, the Lord's supper is considered an incidental ordinance of the church to be dispensed with quickly at the end of a preaching service; to others it is an ancient ceremony whose meaning is hidden in mystery and ritual. However, this was not always the case. In the early church, the Lord's supper was integral in the life of the church. The Lord's supper was instituted by the Lord Jesus Christ in the gospels. The book of Acts lists the Lord's supper as one of the four foundational practices of New Testament church life (Acts 2:42). The apostle Paul declares that his teaching on the Lord's supper was received by special revelation from the risen Christ (1 Cor. 11:23). The weekly Lord's supper was important in the early church; it was important during the Reformation; it was important during the Wesleyan revivals in England. In virtually every major period of church history, the Lord's supper stood at the forefront of the life of the local church. Throughout the history of the church, whenever the church was experiencing spiritual revival, the Lord's supper was especially vibrant and alive. However, when the church was in spiritual decline, the worship of Christ at the Lord's supper was stifled, muted, and shrouded in mystery. In every generation the Lord's supper functioned as a spiritual barometer, measuring the spiritual health of the church.

The Current Situation in the Evangelical Church

Today, as never before, the biblical practice of the Lord's supper stands in jeopardy. There are many who are questioning its significance. Others are trivializing its importance. Others allege that the regular celebration of the Lord's supper is an obstacle to church growth. They contend that Scripture never commands us to celebrate the Lord's supper weekly. Long accepted principles of biblical worship are now being replaced by modern marketing techniques. Clever numerical growth strategies using sociological and demographic studies are competing with the standards and patterns of the Word of God. Saddest of all, in many New Testament churches the Word of God is losing this all-important battle.

If the pages of Christian history could speak, they would raise their uncompromising disapproval. Was there ever a true revival where there was not a return to true worship? Was there ever a time that the practice of the Lord's supper was not a mark of genuine revival? Would we dare neglect to examine our own spiritual condition when the worship of Christ at the Lord's Supper no longer attracts our hearts? Can our hearts remain unmoved and indifferent when churchgoers crowd in to hear a rock band and drama presentation at the 11:00 service, while there are so few true worshippers found at the Lord's table? Has the church exchanged holiness and reverence in worship for the atmosphere and glitter of Hollywood? Have we become so busy being happy that we have forgotten to be holy worshippers?

“ The Lord knew well the tendency of our hearts to slip away from Him. To meet this tendency was one of His objectives in the institution of the Lord's supper. He would gather His people around His own blessed person. There they might see the love of God for them and the blood of Christ which has made them fit to be there.”

C. H. Macintosh
(1820-1896)

The 1st Century Church and the Lord's Supper

The early church period was characterized by spiritual worship. During the first century, after the death of Christ, the church expanded at a rapid rate. Hundreds of local churches were established in Europe, Africa, and throughout Asia Minor. Nevertheless, the Lord's supper remained central in the life of the local church. Justin Martyr (120-165AD) was a leading historian and apologist for the early church. He describes the vigor and the importance of the Lord's supper during this time of spiritual revival. He writes:

We greet one another with a holy kiss. Then a leader from the believers takes a loaf of bread and a cup of wine; after taking them, he offers up praise to the Father of all things, through the name of the Lord. When he has ended his prayers and thanksgiving, the whole congregation present assents by saying 'amen'. After thanksgiving, the deacons among us distribute it to those who are present...no one is allowed to partake of it unless he believes...For the apostles delivered in the memoirs compiled by them, which are called Gospels, that this command was given to them—that Jesus took bread.¹

Protestant Reformation and the Lord's Supper

During the Reformation many truths that had been shrouded in darkness since the early days of the church were recovered. Some of the truths recovered: were *solo fide*, salvation by faith alone; *solo scriptura*, the word of God is the sole authority of faith and life; and *solo gratis*, salvation is by and through the grace of God. However, the New Testament teaching concerning the Lord's supper was also a leading truth during the Reformation. Thousands of men and women who had found faith in Christ sought to express their worship at the Lord's supper. One of the leaders of the Reformation, John Calvin, sought to give direction to these swelling numbers of new believers. He wrote in his *Institutes*:

At least once a week the table of the Lord ought to be spread before each congregation of Christians, and the promises should be declared for their spiritual nourishment; no person ought to be compelled to partake, but all ought to be exhorted and stimulated, and those who were negligent should be reproved.²

Martin Luther also provided important teaching to these believers. Luther, along with John Calvin and the other Reformers, argued for a weekly remembrance of the Lord's supper. Historian Scott Brenner writes of Luther's passion concerning the Lord's supper and its lasting effect on generations of Christians:

Luther heartily advocated a return to the Lord's supper as the normal worship of the congregation on the Lord's day. The determination of Luther to retain the Lord's supper as the norm of worship was so strong that the Lutheran churches in Germany continued without a break to worship in this historic way until about 1722, when the acids of rationalism had eroded their biblical moorings.³

The passion for the worship of Christ would not die in Europe with the rise of German Rationalism. In England, the Wesleyan revival would restore some of its New Testament character.

The Wesleyan Revival and the Lord's Supper

In every great spiritual revival, renewed emphasis and interest in the Lord's supper was God's stamp of approval upon that movement. Interest in the Lord's supper was never a detriment to spiritual growth. Worshipful appreciation of Christ is the natural outflow of a changed heart and life. The most powerful spiritual awakenings in history have often been characterized by a two-fold renewal in worship: firstly, a renewal of simplicity in the practice of the Lord's supper; then a

“Whenever we observe the Lord's supper, we must not forget that this remembrance is the very center of Christian worship.

We come to remember Him, to adore Him, to worship Him, and to magnify Him. It is the highest exercise of Christian worship.”

G. Campbell Morgan
(1863-1945)

renewal of spiritual appreciation for the Lord's supper.

Simplicity of worship has often been a great characteristic of true revival down through the centuries. Elaborate ceremony and arranged worship will, almost without exception, lead to dead ritual, which neither pleases God nor satisfies the heart of man. A true mark of spiritual revival time and again has been a return to worship in simplicity and the rejection of the forms and ceremony of the established churches. The Wesleyan revival in England is a striking example of this practice. The Spirit of God began to work in the hearts of a small company of believers. As they studied God's Word, they were convinced that these principles of worship should be put into practice. In simplicity they attempted to carry out what they found in the Scriptures to be true. Soon the power of God began to change the hearts and lives of these men. As their lives changed, their hearts were soon burdened to express their worship of Christ. Soon, to celebrate the Lord's supper simply as the New Testament instructs, became their passion. One researcher writes of how the Lord led in their lives:

*In November, 1729, four young gentlemen of Oxford, Mr. John Wesley, Mr. Charles Wesley, Mr. Morgan, and Mr. Kirkham of Merton College spent some evenings together in reading chiefly the Greek New Testament. To the original four, others were added to the Club, one of whom, John Clayton, son of a Manchester bookseller, led the members in a new direction. In his father's shop he had read many of the early Christian writers and was constantly illuminating discussions with references from the same. Soon the group eagerly embraced the early church practice of the weekly Lord's supper. The evangelical revival quickly became a revival of worship as well. Hundreds of eager converts crowded into their once near-empty parish churches to receive communion often, to the consternation of the religious leaders who were unused to such enthusiasm. The evangelical leadership were quick to restore, first monthly, and then weekly communion services.*⁴

The simple way of worship also found its way into the life of believers in the north of Great Britain. Fifty-eight years later in Scotland, James and Robert Haldane, ministers of the gospel, traveled in a carriage and were well supplied with tracts which they themselves wrote, printed, and distributed. They spoke in churches and schools, but chiefly in the open air. Hundreds, and sometimes thousands, gathered to hear them; there was much power in their testimony and many were converted. At the fair at Kirkwall, three to four thousand listened daily, and on the Lord's day some 6,000 gathered to hear. Following the principle of the New Testament, they began to take the Lord's supper the first day of each week. Robert Haldane recalled,

*I began practising the Lord's supper monthly. Afterwards I became convinced that on the principles I held, that I ought to observe it weekly. I met with a few individuals who erected themselves into a church; and I am convinced that any group of Christians may act as we did.*⁵

Missionary Revivals and the Lord's Supper

An accompanying hallmark to simplicity in worship has been a great heartfelt appreciation of Christ at the Lord's supper. A leading feature of spiritual revival has been the tenderhearted affection present in remembering the Lord Jesus Christ in His death. In America the gospel went forth to the Indians in New Jersey through the missionary David Brainerd. Here, and in other places, as the Spirit of God mightily moved in the hearts of men, spiritual revival was accompanied by a sincere appreciation of the Lord's supper. David Brainerd wrote in his journal on July 13, 1746:

There appeared tender affection in the assembly under divine truth; my

“The Lord's supper is the zenith of assembly fellowship, the one unique gathering of saints when all spiritual exercise is directed Godward. God does not assess the spirituality of His people by the activity of their service alone, nor by the eloquence of their preaching, but by the quality of their worship”.

**J. Boyd
Nicholson**

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soul was also somewhat refreshed. I administered the Lord's supper to 31 of the Indians. God seemed to be real and present among us. The worshippers were sweetly melted and refreshed. Oh, how they melted when the elements were first uncovered. There was scarcely a dry eye among them when I took off the linen, and showed them the symbols of Christ's body. ⁶

It is refreshing to see Christ-centered worship at the forefront of the gathering-together of the New Testament church. This worship pleases the heart of God and empowers the evangelical witness and spiritual life of the church.

Worship, the True Mark of Spiritual Vitality

Throughout the centuries, the weekly practice and the genuine appreciation of the Lord's supper was an indication of the spiritual strength of the Christian church. The past is the great interpreter of the present and a safeguard of the future. A worshipping assembly is always a spiritually robust assembly. Biblical orthodoxy leads to worshipful doxology. Where there is no vision the people perish; and likewise it is true where there is no worship believers languish. When the assembly gathers together, the Lord Jesus Christ must have the first place in all things. He is the Lord of our lives and Head over the church, His body. Unfortunately, today we are beginning to see a marked departure from this essential truth. May the church soon realize that the sincere appreciation and the regular practice of the Lord's supper is a measure of her spiritual strength. The pattern is plain throughout history: when the church began to forget the Lord in worship, very soon thereafter she also forgot her calling in the world. When we ignore the voice and testimony of history, we do so at our peril.

Endnotes

1. Justin Martyr, *Apology addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius*, translated by L. W. Bernard, (Cambridge, 1967), p. 61
2. John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, vol. 2, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), p.602
3. Scott Brenner, *The Way of Worship*, (New York, NY:MacMillian, 1944), p. 75
4. Donald Bridge and David Pypers, *Communion: The Meal That Unites*, (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1981), p. 124
5. E. H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church*, (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1931), p. 298
6. Jonathan Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), p. 280

