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The Lord's Supper

by Harry A. Ironside (1876-1951)

The last Passover feast that God ever recognized was that celebrated by Jesus Himself, with His disciples, in the guest chamber at Jerusalem. On that same evening, He instituted the great central ordinance of Christianity, the Lord's supper, the memorial of His mighty love and infinite sacrifice. Directions for the keeping of this feast are clearly given in the New Testament. Believers, who have gone on in the ways of Christ, should always be able to give a scriptural reason for everything connected with the observance of the breaking of the bread in remembrance of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is my desire, as simply as possible, to attempt to answer some of the questions regarding the Lord's supper, having in mind older, but also new, believers in Christ who desire to walk in obedience to His Word.

The Frequency of the Lord's Supper

Perhaps one of the first questions that will be asked is,

"Why observe this feast so frequently when, in many places, it is only at rare intervals that what is commonly called 'the communion' is celebrated?"

For answer we reply that we have, in Scripture, no distinct commandment as regarding the particular times it is to be celebrated. The Passover was celebrated once per year, but, when the Lord instituted the Supper, He implied much more frequent observance when He said, *"As often as you do this, do it in remembrance of Me."* It is the Lord's desire that His people often show His death in this way, calling to mind frequently His love and sacrifice for them. In the earliest days of the Church's history, the Christians broke bread daily; but, when the first days of transition passed, and the new dispensation was fully established, we get the Scriptural example in Acts 20:7, *"Upon the first day of the week the disciples came together to break bread and Paul preached unto them."*

In apostolic days, it is well-known that this was the recognized custom. Now this is not a commandment, but it is a word from the Lord, and He has said, "If a man love Me he will keep My words." A devoted heart does not ask "How seldom can I do this and yet have the Lord's approval?" but "What does His Word tell us about the established order in the early days?" The book answers, "On the first day of the week," and, therefore, upon that day, we delight to come together to remember Him.

***"After some
twenty years
had elapsed, the
disciples at
Troas still came
together on the
first day of the
week to observe
this love feast...I
am sure that
wherever love
for Christ is
warm, Believers
delight to
observe this as
often as they
can."***

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(1876-1951)

No Officiating Clergy

“But when so coming together,” the question is asked, “why is there no officiating clergyman to dispense the elements and take charge of the service, as is done in the denominations around us?”

We answer, because we cannot find anything like that in the Book. There is no intimation anywhere, either in the Acts or in any of the epistles, of any such officer of the church. Believers came together as brethren. The Lord Himself has said, *“Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst.”* Faith laid hold of that and recognized His presence. He, the Head of the assembly, is today as true to His Word as in the early days. Wherever two or three are found scripturally gathered, He is in the midst to take charge by the Holy Spirit, and to lead out the hearts of His people in their remembrance of Himself. Of old, in that upper room, when the time came to break the loaf and pass the cup, His own lips pronounced the blessing, and His own hands gave to His disciples. Christ is now in heaven. But Christ's church embraces the Lord Jesus Christ as Head, and its believers on earth as members of His Body. Just as He used the members of His literal body of old to bless and give the emblems, so now He uses the members of His body, the church, as it may please Him. Any brother going to the table to give thanks and to break the loaf or pass the cup, becomes, for the moment, hands and lips for the blessed Lord. There is no human officialism required, the simpler the better. It is Christ with Whom we desire to be occupied. If anything more were necessary, the pages of Scripture would somewhere indicate it to us, but in regard to this we search in vain. *“One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren.”*

The Meaning of the Loaf and the Cup

“Why do you have one unbroken loaf upon the table at the beginning, and why is it broken afterwards?”

Because the one loaf pictures the precious body of our Lord Jesus Christ in its entirety, and the breaking signifies His death. Also we are told, *“We being many are one loaf (bread), for we are all partakers of that one loaf”* (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). To cut the bread into small pieces, as is sometimes done, is to lose sight altogether of this striking symbolism. As it is passed from one to the other, after having been blessed and broken, each again breaks for himself, thus indicating his communion with the body of Christ.

“What is in the cup, and why do all drink of it?”

The cup contains the fruit of the vine. It speaks of the precious blood of Christ, the price of our redemption. *“The cup which we bless is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?”* Just as the rich clusters of grapes are cast into the wine-press and crushed to give forth, what Scripture calls the *“blood of the grape”* (Deuteronomy 32:14), so Christ endured the judgment of God for our sins, and, when crushed in death, His precious atoning blood flowed for our salvation. As we drink in silent worship we recall, with grateful hearts, the mighty cost of our redemption.

“The memorial feast of love, the central ordinance committed to the Church, is designed to bring Jesus Himself before the soul. It is an appeal to our affections... for our love is very inconstant. We forget so soon. Therefore we need that which may quicken our affections and revive our thoughts of Him.”

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Christ the Central Focus of the Lord's Supper

“Why is there no previously-arranged program as to the order of service, the hymns to be sung, prayers to be offered, and the words of heart-felt worship? Is not time wasted in silence which might be used in teaching the Scriptures?”

It is important, first of all, to understand that we do not come together to pray, nor yet to preach, nor to sing or listen to teaching, nor to enjoy Christian fellowship. We come together to meet the Lord Himself, to be solely occupied with Him, to offer Him the worship of our hearts, and to remember what He passed through for us. Let me put it this way: Suppose that on a given Lord's Day morning it were known definitely that our Savior, in person, would be present in our church building. How do you think real Christians would act on such an occasion? Would we not enter the room with a deep sense of awe pervading our spirits? Surely there would be no lightness of behavior, no frivolity, no worldly jesting as we came together. Nor would we be coming to listen to one preaching or teaching the Word of God. Our one desire would be to see Him, to fix our adoring eyes upon His blessed Face; if we spoke at all, it would be to tell something of His sufferings for us, and the gratitude and worship that would fill our hearts as we recalled the agony He endured on the cross. At such a time one can well understand how all might join in a burst of melody, singing together some hymn of praise, in which His holy person, His past sufferings, and His present glory were celebrated! But surely anything like mere fleshly formalism would be altogether out of place. If one spoke audibly, it would be simply to praise His Name, or to bring to the mind of saints some portion of the Word that would give a better understanding and apprehension of His Person or work. No one would dare to push Christ aside, and take His place as the teacher of others, unless requested by the Lord.

The Lord's Supper & Spirit-led Worship

It must be remembered that when we come together for the Lord's Supper, Christ is as truly present in our midst as He was among the first disciples two thousand years ago. Yes, there will be room for praise and for the reading of a portion from the Word of God, which might bring out more vividly the sufferings of Christ. But any brother would be decidedly out of place who sought to give a lengthy exposition of Scripture or an exhortation to the believers. The sense of awe which comes over the soul who recognizes he is in the Lord's presence will curb the flesh. The Holy Spirit will guide those gathered concerning prayers of worship, the spiritual tone, and portions of the Word of God which exalt the Lord Jesus Christ. If there be periods of silence there will be no wasted time as we all sit gazing with rapt, adoring eyes upon Himself, whom we have come to meet. It is also well understood that prayers of a general nature, prayers for the salvation of the lost, and intercessions for the sick are quite out of place. These subjects of prayer are necessary, proper, and good, but should be brought before the Lord at the weekly prayer meeting and in private prayer.

“They gathered together to remember the Lord Jesus Christ. Whether there was a preacher or not made little difference;... whether there was beautiful singing or not, they were not concerned about that; but they were concerned about remembering the Lord Jesus Christ.”

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The Lord's Supper is for True Christians

"Why is this holy and reverent time of worship not open for everyone? Why is such care taken so that only true believers and those walking faithfully with the Lord partake at this worship time?"

This supper is for those who have a deep love for Christ and have been saved by His blood. In 1 Corinthians chapter 5, Christians are directed to walk in a path of separation from evil and evil-doers. We are told, *"with such a one do not eat."* Again in 1 Corinthians 6 we have impressed upon us the importance of walking apart from the world, if we are to have fellowship in the things of God. This clearly includes the Lord's Supper, and shows to us its holy character. And while it is true that each individual is responsible to examine himself, in the fear of the Lord, before sitting down to eat of the loaf and drink of the cup, there is a grave responsibility resting on assemblies of Christians to maintain a fellowship that is holy and faithful to the instruction of Christ.

A Call to Reverence at the Lord's Supper

And, in closing, let me press upon the hearts of the worshipers at the Lord's Supper to remember that distractions during these times can greatly disturb spiritual worship. A little care as to this will often go a long way towards creating a climate for precious and happy times of worship. Sadly, individuals coming in late and distracting the attention of others may greatly hinder the worship of the heart. It is a pitiful commentary on the spiritual state of many believers that they can be sharply on time every weekday morning to their places of business or employment, and yet be among the stragglers on the first day of the week, when the hour set is much later than that which they frequently go to business. A heart for Christ is what is needed to put this right.

This article was adapted from a sermon given by Harry A. Ironside. He was internationally beloved for his teaching of the Word of God. He labored in the exposition of the Scripture for over 50 years and was the author of over 60 books on the Bible and Bible subjects.