

The “Meat” Of The Lord’s Supper

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Introduction

“Visit a church on Sunday morning-almost any will do-and you will likely find a congregation comfortably relating to a deity who fits nicely within precise doctrinal positions, or who lends almighty support to social crusades....But you will not likely find much awe...”

What a contrast to the words which describe the church in the dawn of her establishment:

“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:41-47).

Please give consideration to the wording of verse 43: “Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles” (Acts 2:43, NASB). They were experiencing the awe, the reverential respect, of the gospel message as they heard for the first time what we refer to as “the old, old story”. I want the word “everyone” in that verse to include me. I want us as a member of the congregation where we worship and work to experience it. I want to be filled with “awe” before my God. The early church had a glorious unity. Needs were seen and met. They enjoyed getting together. They praised and worshiped God. They loved and lived as a vibrant part of their community. They grew steadily in number. There was and still is a simple plan for it. We live in an exciting time in the Lord’s church; but, those words which depict the church in her infancy pull and ignite something within my heart and I believe they do the same within the heart of others who love the Lord’s church. The words

recorded by Luke, preserved by the Holy Spirit, provide us with that simple plan: “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:43).

The Meat

Once a month, Billy Thomas, who lives just outside of Washington, D.C., visits the Vietnam War Memorial. You would think a person could see all that needs to be seen in a couple of visits; but, Mr. Thomas has been visiting the Memorial for almost forty years, once a month. Why? He is so grateful for the sacrifice his friend paid to save his life. He stands and he remembers. There’s more, Mr. Thomas says. That kind of sacrifice calls for him to live a life worthy of his friend’s death. His friend’s vicarious death encourages Mr. Thomas to live in the same manner in which his friend died; something bigger than himself.

Please invest a few minutes as we consider a few passages which record the origin of the Lord’s Supper. Matthew records from an eyewitness account: “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). According to verse two of this same chapter, what Jesus and His disciples were eating on that occasion was the Passover meal - that commemorative supper which brought to mind the night Israel was delivered from Egyptian bondage. That memorial was commanded by God and had been observed by the Jews since the days Moses. It was an observation unique to the Old Testament and to the Jews. And on this particular occasion Christ used it to institute a new memorial that would be for Christians based on an event that was about to happen – the shedding of His own blood for the forgiveness of our sins.

As Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, he mentions the command: “...this do in remembrance of me,” something also included in our Lord’s instructions written in Luke’s gospel account, 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” (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

While Paul, was not an eyewitness to the origin of the Lord’s Supper on the night Jesus was betrayed, according to verse twenty-three of this passage he “...received of the Lord...” what he delivered to the Corinthians.

A primary purpose of the Lord’s Supper was to serve as a memorial of the death of Christ. Like the Jewish Passover meal, it was to be perpetual throughout the dispensation of the covenant of which it was a part. God knows us very well. He knows that we tend to forget what we do not rehearse - even the most important things - in only a few months or years. Surely after 2000 years we would have forgotten had not this memorial been established for us. We remember.

Every command of Jesus is important to His followers. “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15), our Master decreed. Anyone uninterested in keeping the commands of Christ has a problem that goes much deeper than the Lord’s Supper. We have already seen Jesus’ command in the passages we read. “Take, eat; this is My body,” Jesus commanded His disciples in Matthew 26:26. Then again in verse 27, “Drink ye all of it...” “This do in remembrance of me,” Jesus said in Luke’s account and in Paul’s writing to the church at Corinth.

Yet these commands were given to His disciples back then. How do we know that the Lord’s Supper was intended to be a perpetual command coming down to us today? We know that this memorial was to be perpetuated as we see how the early church, under the direction of inspired apostles, observed it. In Acts 2:42, we read of the first century church in Jerusalem (which at that time had twelve living apostles present to guide it): “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.” As he referenced “...in breaking of bread...” Luke was not reporting on the daily eating habits of the church. Actually he did report on their common eating habits four verses later in this chapter and he used a different phrase. Also, in Acts 2:46, he speaks of their eating “...their meat with gladness and singleness of heart.” It seems reasonable to conclude that he was referring to the Lord’s Supper in verse 42. This conclusion is based on the setting of the words that surround it.

The apostles' teaching, fellowship, and prayer are spiritual actions and Luke was reporting on their steadfast practice of them.

Was Jesus' command to eat the Lord's Supper intended to be perpetual? It is apparent that the early church believed it was. The apostles who were Christ's representatives did too, as the church continued in their teaching. Paul's negative statement in 1 Corinthians 11:20, "When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's Supper," contains a strong inference that it was supposed to be a purpose of their meeting. Acts 20:7 also shows us the continuous way in which the early church observed the Lord's Supper. We read of the church in the city of Troas: "And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight."

During the seven days that Paul spent in Troas, there was one day especially mentioned: Sunday – the first day of the week. On that day the church at Troas met to break bread – that is, to partake of the Lord's Supper. That Paul, an inspired apostle of Christ, approved of their practice is seen in his participation in it. We perpetually observe the command of Jesus to "...do this in remembrance of me..." just as the early church did under the direction of the apostles of Jesus.

We also learn there is a right way and a wrong way to partake of the Lord's Supper. Let us take the time to remind ourselves of the words of the apostle Paul:

"Now in this that I declare unto you I praise you not, that ye come together not for the better, but for the worse. For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it. For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you. When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's supper. For in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken. What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? shall I praise you in this? I praise you not. 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. Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world. Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, tarry one for another. And if any man hunger, let him eat at home; that ye come not together unto condemnation. And the rest will I set in order when I come" (1 Corinthians 11:17-33).

Paul began with the Corinthians by telling them to have a look around at how they were treating their Christian brothers and sisters. Many commentators believe that the Corinthians had either mingled the Lord's supper with what was in the early Christian assemblies called the love-feast, a sort of ancient version of our potluck suppers or perhaps even worse, they had reached back into their idol-worshipping past and incorporated some of the gluttony they had experienced there. Whatever they were doing when they came together for what was supposed to be the Lord's Supper, there was little concern for each other. What they did amounted to a gluttonous feast where the wealthier members brought an abundance of food and drink which they hoarded to themselves while the poor among them were simply left out because they had nothing. This exclusion of some by others simply highlighted the self-centered divisions that existed among them.

Paul was teaching them, and us, that Christianity involves more than just an individual's relationship with God. It also involves a relationship with others who are Christians. Evidence of this important truth is all over the New Testament Scriptures. For instance, "He that saith he is in

the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now” (1 John 2:9). “Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him” (1 John 3:15). “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?” (1 John 4:20).

One of the things the Lord’s Supper is supposed to be to the church is an acknowledgment of unity. When we eat the bread and drink the cup together, we are supposed to be one with God and one with each other. God wants us to come before Him as one body, not as a squabbling, self-centered, splintered fracture. Earlier in the Corinthian letter, Paul had written: “For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread” (1 Corinthians 10:17). There is a correspondence between the oneness of bread we eat together at communion and our unity.

Paul used two words in this passage to identify the dysfunction of the Corinthian church that was causing their time together to be spiritually lethal and ultimately spiritually fatal: the word “divisions,” in verse 18, and the word “heresies” in verse 19. The first word, “divisions,” translates a word that often signified a rip or a tear. Several times in the New Testament, this word is used to describe a tear in a garment. Most of us are familiar with the rips and tears that can develop in the fellowship of a church. Somebody doesn’t like somebody else. The feeling is mutual – or perhaps it isn’t mutual, but it is real. Somebody gets offended and the issue is never resolved – or perhaps the offended one is unwilling to forgive. Rifts between members prevail and little effort is made to resolve them. Perhaps, that was simmering at Corinth and it was making their observance of the Lord’s Supper unacceptable and deadly. What we think about one another and how we relate with one another is essential in the context of the Lord’s Supper.

The second word Paul used in these verses to refer to division is the word “heresies,” in verse 19: “For there must also be heresies among you...” W.E. Vine, in his Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, gives this word a very specific definition. He says it is “an opinion, especially a self-willed opinion, which is substituted for submission to the power of truth.” All of us have our opinions. I certainly have mine. If you ever come to me and try to talk me out of them, you had better bring a pretty good argument from the Bible. Having opinions is not the problem. The problem comes when our opinions are driven by self-will instead of a desire for the ultimate truth. In other words, no amount of convincing proof from Scripture will cause us to change. The heretical mind is made up and not even an accurate presentation of the

truth to the contrary will make any difference. Paul, in Galatians 5:20, lists that kind of closed mindedness a work of the flesh. Here, in 1 Corinthians 11, it is something that will make our assembling with the Christians a futile and divinely insulting exploit. So when we come together for the Lord's Supper, let us make sure we are one with each other having our eyes fixed on unity.

A "worthy manner" of partaking of the Lord's Supper includes a remembrance of those events on that night when Jesus was betrayed and ultimately killed. He met with His disciples for the Passover meal on the night He was betrayed. Then they went with Him to Gethsemane where He prayed to His Father that if possible, the cup of suffering could be removed from Him. Yet, He also said, "...nevertheless; not my will, but Thine, be done" (Luke 22:42). Then they arrested Him and dragged Him before illegal assemblies and finally before Pilate who had Him scourged. He was nailed to a cross between the two condemned thieves. Besides the obvious physical suffering there was the humiliation and knowledge that He was there, not for what He had done, but for the sins of others. Then finally, after the horrible, unjust suffering, He died. Joseph and Nicodemus took Him to the tomb.

Why remember His death? "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). We focus on the death of Christ because we know that it is His death that saved us. The Word Who became flesh also became sin for me and He died in my place. He is my redemption. He is my salvation. I do not want to forget that sacrifice.

"But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep" (1 Corinthians 11:28-30).

The word "examine" that Paul chose is surely more than just a quick glance. Paul chose a word that was used in the refining of metals. Raw ore was heated to its melting point, and then stirred. This allowed the impurities to float to the top. These were skimmed off and more stirring was done, along with more skimming until the refiner could see a clear picture of his own image reflecting back as he gazed into the molten metal. When we examine ourselves we are looking

for and removing impurities. We are looking for a reflection of the truth about ourselves. We are looking into the perfect law of liberty and making the needed changes in our lives. We will live each day in a manner that is worthy of the sacrifice Christ made for us.

As we have gone through this passage, have we noticed that we cannot properly partake of the Lord's Supper without some conscious effort? Yet, how easy it is to go to worship with our minds on something entirely different, go through the motions of eating the bread and drinking the cup, never having considered much of anything very seriously. We might attempt to reason that God knows we are sincere and we try hard; but, we are so busy and we have a lot on our minds. We might continue to reason, thankfully, He is a God of love. Yes, He is a God of love and He knows us better than we do ourselves. But do we think it would be the loving thing to do for Him to allow us to treat this important observation of unity, this important time of remembrance, this time of self-examination as though it were unimportant?

Whatever we may believe about God's love, this passage shows us that God means business about the Lord's Supper. If we fail to worship properly, we will judge ourselves unworthy of that most precious sacrifice. If will judge or examine ourselves, we will not be judged by God. However, if we do not judge or examine ourselves; then, the Lord will discipline us.

Conclusion

We are blessed with honor to gather around the table of our Lord every Sunday. May I lovingly challenge us all to examine ourselves as we remember, participate and judge ourselves in loving unity. May we strive to live each day to speak and live in a manner that would honor God and point all men to His glory. For He alone is worthy. You are truly loved.