

Lord's Supper

A Biblical Overview

Cecil N. Wright

Oriental Society

To be invited to eat at the table of another was considered a great honor, a symbol of friendship and fellowship, and not to be taken lightly. If taken thus, it was considered an insult, as indicated by Jesus in his Parable of the Slighted Wedding Invitation (Matthew 22:1-14) -- and to come improperly dressed was likewise considered reprehensible (garments usually being furnished by the host, so that not to wear them was inexcusable) -- which, with reference to the church or kingdom of heaven, would be without having "put on Christ," and wearing him as one's robe of righteousness. (Galatians 3:27)

Jewish Passover

The Passover was instituted by God through Moses for the Children of Israel prior to the last plague, the death of the firstborn, as they prepared to depart from Egypt. The word "Passover" is from the Hebrew *pesach*, "passing over" -- that is, "sparing" -- and relates to the sparing of the firstborn of the Israelites who had the blood of a sacrificial lamb sprinkled on their door posts and lentils at the time that all other firstborn in Egypt died at midnight. And the term is applied to both the feast as a whole and the sacrifice proper.

"The Passover supper ritual ordinarily consisted of three parts: (1) Preliminaries, which included drinking the first cup -- "fruit of the vine" -- out of a total of four; (2) The main meal, (a) eaten with unleavened bread (a half cake or loaf of which, called the *Aphiqomon* or after-dish, was put aside for after supper [after the main meal]), and (b) included the drinking of a second cup; during which (c) the youngest in the company asked the meaning of all the observances of the occasion and explanation was made as the ritual proceeded, which included (d) the singing of the first two Psalms (113 and 114) in the series called the "Hallel" (hymns of praise), and (e) closed with the pouring of a third cup, called the "cup of blessing"; and (3) Postliminaries, varied and not completely structured, but drinking the "cup of blessing" and normally ending with the drinking of a fourth cup and singing the last part of the Hallel (Psalm 136) and sometimes other hymns as well." (Alfred Edersheim's monumental Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah (8th Revised Edition, 1915, 2 volumes), in chapter 10, "The Paschal Supper -- The Institution of the Lord's Supper" Vol. II, pp.490-512)

All the foregoing details are important. The lamb eaten by the Jews in their Passover meal was a type of Christ, called by John the Baptist "the lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29, 36), and described by the apostle Paul as "our Passover" -- saying, "our Passover also hath been sacrificed, even Christ. (1 Corinthians 5:7) So it was fitting that the supper that was to perpetuate the memory of Christ, as the Jewish Passover had been a forecast of his sacrifice, should be instituted from elements of the latter, which it was now to supersede.

Institution of The Lord's Supper

This was done by Jesus at the time of his last supper with his disciples (apostles), using two elements from the Passover meal they were eating, or had eaten -- namely, unleavened bread ("as they were eating" (Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22) and the "cup," or "fruit of the vine" ("after supper" Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25) -- saying, "I appoint unto you a kingdom, even as my Father hath appointed unto me, that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom." (Luke 22:29) And in recent remarks Jesus had used the terms

"my church" and "kingdom of heaven" interchangeably. (Matthew 16:18-19) Hence, if we eat at his table in his kingdom, we do so in his church. Accordingly, the inspired apostle Paul instructed the church at Corinth with reference to the Lord's Supper, which some of its members were profaning. (1 Corinthians 11:17-34)

The "cup of the Lord" and the "table of the Lord" are associated in 1 Corinthians 10:20-21, with evident reference to the Lord's Supper. And the "table of the Lord" is contrasted with the "table of demons," so that one "cannot partake [either logically or acceptably] of the table of the Lord, and of the demons." For there is nothing in common between Christ and demons, and eating at the table of demons would signify "communion" (joint participation, or fellowship) with them -- which Christians are forbidden to have. Their fellowship is to be with Christ; and "partaking of the table of the Lord" -- of the "cup" and "bread" of the Lord's Supper -- is a communion [or partaking of the benefits] of the blood ... [and] body of Christ." (v.16)

Characteristics of the Lord's Supper

1. A Memorial (as already indicated) -- of the death and sufferings of Christ for our sins -- a supper to be observed in memory of him. (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25) Its elements (bread and fruit of the vine) symbolize and memorialize his body and blood.

A number of technicalities that are not unimportant may well be noted, including the following:

- a. Jesus specifically told all his disciples to drink of the cup (Matthew 26:27-28), and "they all drank of it" (Mark 14:23). The cup is no less important than the bread, for without the shedding of blood, which it memorializes, "there is no remission," that is, of sins (Hebrews 9:22) -- and ought not be withheld from those in the pews as is done in one large and prestigious religious body, the priest drinking it in their stead!
- b. The American Standard Version of 1 Corinthians 11:24 states in reference to the bread that Jesus said, "This is my body, which is for you", but in the margin explains, "Many ancient authorities read is broken for you," which is the way the King James Version reads. And the ASV text does seem elliptical, with something in reference to his body being implied as being done for them.

John 6:51 has it being "given" -- Jesus saying, "The bread I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world." Correspondingly, Luke 22:19 has Jesus saying at the instituting of the Lord's Supper, "This is my body which is given for you." But of course, in the "giving," his flesh was indeed "broken" -- mangled with thongs and pierced with thorns and spear, even though no bone was broken. (see John 19:31-37) Surely either expression is appropriate as an abbreviated or summary statement of what Jesus may have more elaborately said.

- c. Jesus said of the bread in the Lord's Supper, "this is my body," and of the fruit of the vine, "this is my blood." Yet literally they were bread and fruit of the vine (also called "cup," referring to the contents under the name of the container), and the scriptures refer to them as such. Hence, they were not to be understood as his body and blood literally, but as representations, symbols, or emblems of such. His body had not yet been "given" or "broken" for them, and his blood had not yet been "shed." It is as if one has pictures representing his father and his mother, and says, "This is my father" and "this is my mother." He does not mean the pictures have become the actual substance of his father and mother. By the same token, Jesus did not teach the doctrine of "transubstantiation" (changing of substance) when

he said of the bread and cup, "This is my body," "This is my blood." Furthermore, just as a picture serves as a memorial of the one it represents, so the observance of the Lord's Supper is to be "in remembrance" of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:24-25), and the supper itself is therefore a memorial of him -- of his body given for us, and of his blood shed for our sins.

2. A Proclamation. Just as the supper is for the participant a memorial of the death of Christ for our redemption, it is also a proclamation of such to the observer. "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye proclaim the Lord's death till he come. (1 Corinthians 11:26) For such to be the case, however, relevant information has to be made known with reference to its significance, as per the foregoing.
3. An Anticipation. Owing to the fact that the Lord's Supper is to be observed "till he come" (1 Corinthians 11:26), it is also observed in anticipation of his second coming, He not only died for us, but arose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and promised to return to receive us unto himself, that where he is we may also be. (John 14:3) Were it not for that, the significance of the supper otherwise would lack most of its importance for us.
4. A Thanksgiving or Eucharist. It is said that Jesus "blessed" or "gave thanks" for each element of the Lord's Supper, separately, when instituting it. (See Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25) The expressions "blessed" and "gave thanks" are used interchangeably -- and in the same sense -- which is very important for us to know in order to be properly edifying in our comments and prayers in connection with the supper.

In 1 Corinthians 10:16, as already mentioned, the cup (or fruit of the vine) is called "the cup of blessing which we bless" -- meaning "the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks." In the texts of Matthew 26:27; Mark 14:23; and Luke 22:17, which say Christ "gave thanks," the Greek original is *eucharistesis*, a verb from of the noun *eucharistia*, which in English we render "thankfulness," or "giving of thanks," or "thanksgiving." It is highly important for us to offer to the Lord our thanks.

It may be that some would say they mean by "asking the blessing," to ask the Lord to sanctify or set apart the particular meal, or part thereof in case of the Lord's supper, "for its intended use" [as sometimes heard in connection with the Lord's Supper -- without stating what that "use" is]. Yet that is not the meaning of the scripture in 1 Corinthians 10:16, but rather our thanksgiving for it for said purpose or use. And, likewise, when Christ is said to have "blessed" the bread in instituting the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:42), he "gave thanks" for it (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24) -- the two terms being used interchangeably and in the same sense.

[NOTE: Bless was chosen in Old English (O.E.) bibles to translate the Latin word *benedicere* and the Greek word *eulogein* meaning "to consecrate, make holy." -- (Online Etymological Dictionary) and *eulogeo* has been translated as "bless or blessed" rather than "to praise or give thanks." This change is significant in regard to the Lord's Supper as it appears to support the doctrine of God changing the bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ. (Bibleway coment)]

5. A Communion -- symbolizing both (a) the fellowship of the saints with Christ and, indirectly, (b) the fellowship of the saints with one another, because they all have a like fellowship with Christ. That seems

to be the thought expressed in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, as follows: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion of [or, means of sharing in] the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion of [or, means of sharing in] the body of Christ? Seeing that we, who are many, are one bread, or body: for we all partake of the one bread."

Everett Ferguson, in The Living Word Commentary, seems appropriate to say: "Partaking of the bread, thus, is not only an act uniting the believer with Christ but an act uniting one believer with other believers in the body of Christ. It has both individual and corporate dimensions, and both involve actual participation with the person of Christ."

Coneybeare and Howson, in The Life and Epistles of Saint Paul, render the passage thus: "When we drink the cup of blessing, which we bless, are we not all partakers [jointly] in the blood of Christ? When we break the bread, are we not all partakers [jointly] in the body of Christ? For as the bread is one, so we, the many, are one body; for of that one bread we all partake."

NOTE: Christ's blood is "the blood of the covenant" (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24) -- "of the new covenant" (Luke 22:20) -- of which he is the Mediator (Hebrews 9:15). This means that our drinking of it in the sense that we do in the Lord's Supper symbolizes our covenant relationship with him and the Father, and therefore the "communion" referred to above.

6. A Feast? In 1 Corinthians 5:7-8 we read: "Purge out the old leaven [referring particularly to a brazen and unrepentant fornicator to be "taken away from among you" of vs.1-6], that ye may be a new lump, even as ye are [supposed to be] unleavened. For our Passover also hath been sacrificed, even Christ: wherefore let us keep the feast [evidently our Passover feast], not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

Profaning of Lord's Supper in Corinthian Church

This had its basis in factionalism, part of it social, that shamefully manifested itself in their assemblies supposedly for worship. And, since there is no evidence of Christians yet having "church buildings" in which they met, this also likely had its setting in a large private home of one of the more well-to-do members, used as a place of assembly, where there may have been less formality in their meetings in some respects than would otherwise have been the case, with ordinary social distinctions between rich and poor, slave and master, not only retained but actually accentuated. (1 Corinthians 11:17-34)

Some years later, when Paul was writing his letter to the Romans from Corinth, he said, "Gaius my host, and of the whole church, saluteth you" (Romans 16:23) -- likely meaning that the church in Corinth was at that time meeting in the home of Gaius. We do not know where it was meeting at the earlier time when Paul wrote to it as follows:

"But in giving you this charge [likely the preceding one in regard to the head-dress of women, which we may deal with in a separate supplemental study], 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 [the assembly], I hear that divisions exist among you; and I partly believe it. For there must be also factions [a word involving deliberate choices] among you, that they that are approved may be made manifest among you [which may have been written in irony and with a touch of sarcasm]. When therefore ye assemble yourselves together, it is not possible to

eat the Lord's supper: for in your eating each one [responsible for this reprehensible situation] taketh before other his own supper that is, 'each begins to eat (what he brought for) his own supper before anything has been given to others' (Coneybeare and Howson); or, 'every one taketh first his own supper' before eating the Lord's Supper (Macknight); and one is hungry, and another is drunken. What, have ye not houses to eat and drink in? Or despise ye the church of God, and put them to shame that have not? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I praise you not ... Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, wait one for another. If any man is hungry, let him eat at home; that your coming together be not unto judgment." (1 Corinthians 17-22, 33-34)

NOTE: Verses 23-32 are omitted, having already been made use of in regard to the instituting and significance and proper observance of the Lord's Supper, though references may again be made to them. In the verses omitted, Paul analyzes the problem principally from the standpoint of the "haves" and "have nots" [some of whom may have been slaves], and from the standpoint of ignoring the supper's spiritual significance and intent.

It is obvious that something besides the Lord's Supper is also involved in the foregoing passage. The latter had been instituted in connection with and following the Passover supper, which had been a meal for physical as well as spiritual nourishment. And it seems that at least some early Christians likewise ate a fellowship meal for physical nourishment in connection with and preceding the Lord's Supper. Such a fellowship meal, whether with or without the Lord's supper, is most likely what elsewhere is referred to as a "love feast" (Jude 12; cf. 2 Peter 2:18) -- except that at Corinth it had so degenerated as to make that term a misnomer, and to make a mockery of what would otherwise have been the Lord's Supper associated with it.

A love feast in the proper sense of the term seems to have been a fellowship meal, with each person contributing his own share of what was to be enjoyed in common, except for those too poor to do so but normally invited to share in the common bounty. In Corinth, that was not really the case. They seem to have eaten in groups of their own kind, excluding those not of their own party, and even the poor of their own party who had no supper to bring, so that one was hungry and another filled -- opposite of being hungry, and possibly referring even to intoxication on the part of some. It also appears that some groups came, had their love feast and "Lord's supper," and went before others arrived, or at least before others had finished. Such conduct made it impossible to eat the Lord's Supper in reality, symbolizing fellowship and unity with both the Lord and one another. And from Paul's emphasis on the necessity of "discerning the Lord's body" and partaking of the Lord's Supper truly in memory of Christ, the offenders at Corinth seem to have been guilty of not doing so. Robertson remarks, "It was conduct like this that led to the complete separation between the Love-feast and the Lord's Supper."

In Paul's closing verses (33, 34), he admonished: "Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, wait one for another. If any man is hungry [seeming to mean so hungry as not to wait to eat with the rest], let him eat at home; that your coming together be not unto judgment" -- or "condemnation" (KJV).

Ferguson, in The Living Word Commentary, well says: "The final appeal appears to be addressed to two aspects of their behavior. The first is addressed to their meetings when they do eat together: they are urged to wait for each other; they are not to eat in advance and leave some unfilled, therefore accentuating the differences between the rich and the poor. The second is addressed to the meals in general: If the meals are

going to have nutritional value only, they are advised to eat at home so that their meetings will not result in losing their divine dimension and inviting the judgment of God." (P.152)

An earlier comment of Ferguson is also worth considering from the standpoint of environmental and probable background considerations, as follows:

Domestic customs in the Graeco-Roman world at this time can be fairly well documented. It is known, for example, that a host could invite guests to his home, and rather than serving the same menu to all, he would serve the more distinguished guests delicacies and the less distinguished guests ordinary fare. Nor was it uncommon for the distinguished guests to come early, fare sumptuously, only to be joined later by the other guests. In both cases, it was socially appropriate and fully accepted by the less distinguished guests.

Either, or both, of these customs may underlie the problems in the Corinthian assembly. On the one hand, it looks as if the well-to-do members may have gathered earlier, taken their meals, even to excess, only to be joined later by the 'have nots,' the slaves, for example, who would probably have had to work late (Sundays were not holidays then). If so, Paul's remarks in verse 21 make perfectly good sense, as does his injunction for them to wait one for another" (v.33). Or, if they are meeting together, it is fully possible that the well-to-do were having elaborate meals while the 'have nots' were eating their bread and water, the former to excess, the latter to embarrassment. In this case, Paul's remarks in verses 18, and 19 would refer to these social divisions. And his advice in verses 33, and 34 would be encouraging the church either to erase these distinctions from their assembly or dispense with the 'ordinary' meal together.

Actually, both are possible. The language of verses 17-34 certainly shows that some were 'eating early' and that when all did eat; some ate well while others did not. In any case, their fundamental misunderstanding about what it means to be a "church of God" (vs.22) is analyzed and addressed by Paul in two ways. First, he urges them to develop an awareness of themselves as a group, specifically as the body of Christ. His reminding them of the institution of the Lord's Supper is intended to heighten their awareness that they gather to eat 'the Lord's supper,' not their own supper (vs.20). Second, he urges them to dispense with all inequalities, social, economic, or otherwise which would result in the disintegration of the church of God." (Pp. 145-46)

One Cup or Many?

At one time that was an issue among our brethren. And it had reference to the container rather than the contents. It was argued that there was only one container used in instituting the Lord's Supper, which may or may not have been the case. The language used in the accounts of it would indicate the probability of there being one container passed around by Jesus to the Twelve who were with him, but whether they all drank from that one container or each poured from it into his individual container, and drank from the latter, is not made clear -- and likely would not matter. "The Traditional Passover ... each participant in

the Seder [the meal we are considering] has a wine cup." (J. I. Packer, Merrill C. Tenny, and William White, Jr., The Bible Almanac 1980, p.467)

The Lord's Supper and Edification

In the Bible records of the institution of the Lord's Supper, Jesus is said to have made remarks as to the significance of each element and to offer thanks for each separately before partaking, which surely is appropriate now in our observance of the supper. Appropriate songs and/or scripture selections seem in order as a part of such preliminaries to help focus the minds of worshippers on legitimate aspects of meditation as they partake.

Special care and thoughtfulness need to be exercised in connection with the Lord's Supper to make it truly an edifying experience for all Christians, but especially for babes in Christ and likewise for non-members who may be visiting our assembly in which it is observed. It should be a highlight of the service as a whole -- not just an appendage (or parenthesis, as the case may be) or simply a routine and perfunctory performance, and certainly not factually misleading -- as when, for instance, God the Father is thanked for the emblems of "thy broken body" and "thy shed blood," instead of the body and blood of his Son, as sometimes occurs.

Those who preside at the Lord's Table and/or offer thanks need to be notified previously enough to be prepared in heart and mind to make truly edifying remarks, if any, and offer edifying prayers. While public prayers are to be directed to God the same as private ones are, at the same time they are also intended by God to be edifying to those who hear. One may give thanks in such a way that others are "not edified". (1 Corinthians 14:17)

To be properly edifying, there need not be any straining for effect -- just simple, sincere, thoughtful, reverent (but not pompous or oratorical), and accurate expressions of sentiment and purpose. This is not proper for generalized prayer or even general thanksgiving, but only for that specifically related to what the Lord's Supper is intended to symbolize and commemorate.

Furthermore, for either comments or prayers to reflect the significance of the Lord's supper, they need to specify more than the general fact that we are to "partake of it worthily," or "in a manner well pleasing" unto God, and let it go at that, as in heard to a greater or lesser extent in nearly every congregation. How edifying is that to an uninformed person? Exactly zero as to what that manner is!

Basic to partaking in a "worthy manner" is "discerning the Lord's body" (1 Corinthians 11:27-29), and, of course, his shed blood. That means to see such with the mind's eye. It is impossible to remember anything without seeing it mentally, and the supper is to be partaken of truly "in remembrance" of Christ (vs.23-25). It should be as easy to express that concept specifically in prayer as it is to word the unedifying general statements mentioned above.

When meditatively partaken of in conjunction with appropriately edifying remarks and prayers, the Lord's Supper becomes a rich and enriching spiritual experience. Otherwise, it is a mere ritual, without genuine benefit spiritually for the individual. It can even be so perfunctorily engaged in as to "eat and drink damnation" to oneself -- "not discerning the Lord's body" (1 Corinthians 11:29, KJV). Adapted from The Lord's Supper, a lesson by Cecil Wright