

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

67 What Is the Purpose of the Lord's Supper?

*Scripture: Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20;
I Corinthians 10:16-17, 11:23-31*

Our question is not unlike the one Moses told the children of Israel that they would be asked at the time of the first Passover, *"What mean ye by this service?"* (Exodus 12:26) For Moses in Egypt and the Messiah in Jerusalem both the Passover and the Lord's Supper are taught within a plan that will be passed from generation to generation. Just as Moses was told what to say, believers today would do well to anticipate the question, *"What is the purpose of the Lord's Supper?"*

The last days of the Lord's earthly ministry have no event that moves the imagination more than that which took place on Thursday of the Holy Week when Jesus gathered His friends in sacred association. Aware that He was going to build a church that would draw people out of every culture and nation He gave them a central rite to be observed as a reminder of His teaching and hard death. Thus a practice has come to this day based upon the authority of Christ, revelation and experience. I would like to arrange this study of the Lord's Table around six key words which will help us to understand how we are to partake of the Lord's Table and the purpose God has in this observance for our lives. These words are **(1) Scripturally, (2) Intelligently, (3) Discerningly, (4) Obediently, (5) Regularly, and Expectantly.** The passages listed above are the six basic Scriptures which deal with the Lord's table, three are taken from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and two are from the writings of Paul as found in I Corinthians 10 and 11. may we have the mind of Christ as we seek to understand what was truly the mind of Christ *"on the night when He was betrayed."*

I. SCRIPTURALLY:

Our information about the life and teaching of Christ comes to us from Scripture. It is in Scripture that the now familiar words of Christ have been preserved for us, *"This do in remembrance of me."* The Lord's Supper is not an afterthought on the part of church leaders to give the Christian faith more appeal or character. It is not an ordinance which has somehow evolved with the passing of time. The

Lord's Table was instituted by Christ Himself. Every time this sacred drama is reenacted individuals are involved in an act that has not come to them out of church tradition or the religious concepts of men. Christians have always observed the Lord's Table on high authority, the authority of the Word of God. Let us not confuse the Eucharist with the *"agape"* or *"love feasts"* which were so common among the early Christians. The Book of Jude speaks of "blemishes on your love feasts." (Jude 12) Paul complained that such gatherings majored more on *"feast"* than on *"love"* when he wrote, *"When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's supper. For in eating every one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk."* (I Corinthians 11: 20-21) Many kinds of love feasts are spoken of in secular history and we are not to think of the Communion as an extension of these.

II. INTELLIGENTLY:

1. Names of the Lord's Table:

Some people call it just that. In I Corinthians 10:21 it is referred to as *"the Lord's Table."* Others prefer *"the Lord's Supper"* as mentioned in I Cor. 11:20. Sometimes the title, *"Breaking of Bread"* is chosen because of the words of Acts 20:7, *"And upon the first day of the week when the disciples came together to break bread..."* I have known Christians who use the name "Remember the Lord" because Jesus taught them to do this *"in remembrance of Him."* (I Cor. 11:24) One of the more familiar titles is the "Eucharist" which comes from the Greek word "eucharistesas" meaning "thanksgiving." (I Corinthians 14:16). Many prefer the name "Communion." Paul wrote, *"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?"* (I Cor. 10:16) It seems not important that we choose one name over another as long as the real intent and spirit of the act is to *"remember the Lord."*

2. Held at the Passover Season:

In Luke 22:1 we read, *"Now the feast of unleavened bread drew nigh, which is called the Passover."* In order to appreciate the full meaning of those words we need to go back to the Book of Exodus for some Old Testament history. The Children of Israel were in Egypt and in bondage when they cried to God for a deliverer. God answered their prayer in the person of Moses who marched nine times before the great Pharaoh crying, *"Let my people go."* Each time Pharaoh refused God sent a plague upon the land of Egypt. The

water was turned into blood, the flies covered the land, the locusts destroyed the vegetation and the cattle drooped with sickness. Moses was sent by God one last time, the tenth time before Pharaoh. He said again, *"Thus saith the Lord, let my people go."* Pharaoh did it again. He hardened his heart and would not let the people go. Moses said, *"Because of this my God shall judge your people and the firstborn son, the firstborn in every household, the firstborn animal shall die."* That night about midnight God sent the Angel of Death into the land of Egypt. The firstborn in every household was slain. How did God preserve the lives of the firstborn in believing homes? God said, *"In order that I may show a difference between the Egyptians and the Israelites, I will pass over the houses which have faith."* How was this faith to be exhibited? They were to take a lamb and slay it. The blood from the lamb was to be put on the doorposts of their homes. It was to be applied there with a reed and it would be a sign that the people who lived there believed His word. The Bible tells us in Exodus 12:13-14, *"and the blood shall be to you for a token upon the homes where you are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt. And this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the Lord throughout your generations; ye shall keep it feast by an ordinance forever."* When the Angel of Death saw the blood, he passed over that household. Each year around Easter some Jewish people celebrate the Passover. It is commemorative of that dark night in Egypt so long ago. It is significant that Christ instituted the Communion during the Passover Season. It was because *"He was the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world."* The Apostle Paul taught this truth when he said in I Corinthians 5:7, *"For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us."* Jesus took the time to instruct His disciples in the memorial supper at the Passover Season. Some have tried to equate the Last Supper with the normal Passover Feast and taught that it was nothing more. The Apostle Paul and the early church looked upon this meal and its symbolism as portraying Christ and His death on our behalf. Believers have long recited, *"Thou very Paschal Lamb, Whose blood for us was shed, Through whom we out of Egypt came, Thy ransomed people lead."* An understanding of the Passover will help us to intelligently celebrate the Lord's Table.

3. Elements Used in Celebrating the Lord's Table:

There are two elements used in celebrating the Lord's Table. They are bread and wine or grape juice. A great deal of thought has been given through the years as to whether the bread should be unleavened or the wine should be fermented or unfermented. It seems reasonable to use the unleavened bread after the fact of the ancient Jews who fled from Egypt in such great haste they did not have time to put yeast or leaven into their bread. They did not have time to wait for it to rise. Down through the centuries the Jewish people have used unleavened bread as a reminder of their quick exit from Egypt. This is not an essential part of the Communion service. Jesus makes it most clear in John 6:51-63 that it is the "*Spirit that quickeneth.*" The physical is only a figure of the spiritual. The choice of elements is secondary. It matters little if regular bread or unleavened is used. This brings us to the matter of wine or grape juice. We have good reason to believe that the wine of the New Testament was not unfermented grape juice, but neither was it the kind that comes bottled today by Mogen David. It was different from the wine we have come to be familiar with today. Dr. Robert Stein, associate professor of New Testament at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, has done a fine study in this area. In the June 20, 1975 issue of Christianity Today he writes, "When we come to the New Testament the content of the wine is never discussed." The burden of proof, however, is surely upon anyone who would say that the "wine" of the New Testament is substantially different from the wine mentioned by the Greeks, the Jews during the intertestamental period, and the early church. In the writings of the early church fathers it is clear that "wine" means mixed with water. Justin Martyr described the Lord's Table around A.D. 150, "Bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president sends up prayers and thanksgiving." The whole point here is that we do not have to think of Jesus using the kind of wine we associate with distilled spirits today. That he used wine is quite reasonable. In Jesus' day grape juice could not be kept without it fermenting. They had no modern canning and preserving facilities. It was natural for Him to use the very common beverage of the day. However, it was very often the custom to mix in a ratio of three parts water to one part wine. This was the normal mixture in the Passover ritual and I think we have a fair degree of certainty that it was a mixture such as this that Jesus used when He instituted His supper. Since alcoholism is such a problem today it might be the better part of wisdom to avoid the temptation with the use of grape juice in the Communion service. However,

the same holds true here as with the bread. The essential thing is that we realize the meaning. Grape juice is easily accessible, inexpensive, and nonalcoholic. It is a perfect substitute for the use of wine.

4 The Meaning of the Lord's Supper:

Many different views have arisen regarding the Lord's Table through the centuries. There is much difference of opinion concerning this teaching of Christ. I have always found it interesting that wherever you have people who are making a profession of being Christian, there you will find the Lord's Table in some form.

A. An Offering for Sin:

This, of course, is the traditional Roman Catholic view. Theologically it is known as transubstantiation. This view teaches that the bread and the wine are changed miraculously into the actual body and blood of Christ by a priestly act of consecration. It is essentially a new offering of the body and blood of Christ and is based upon an interpretation of our Lord's words in Matthew 26:26-28. Speaking to His disciples Jesus said, "*This is my body.*" The Newman Club of a Midwestern state college was holding its regular discussion in the Student Union building. The topic was the Blessed Sacrament. After the chaplain had briefly explained the Catholic teaching, one of the non-Catholics present politely raised the question, "Father, the Catholic teaching has no basis or parallel in science, has it? As far as we know, substance always remains the same. In other words, bread always remains bread, and wine always remains wine. They can't be changed into something different." Some discussion followed with the priest concluding with these words, "...if you have ever studied chemistry you know that the food and drink you take is changed into flesh and blood. Do the bread you eat and the wine you drink stay the same? Not at all, they are changed into flesh and blood. If God can work the same change directly and without human means it simply means He is all-powerful which we believe He is. God 'works such a change at the consecration of the Mass.'" The student admitted that he had never thought of that. It is important to note that there is a differentiation between quality and-substance. There is the conviction of faith. There is no external, chemical, or apparent change in the elements. It is the substance that is changed. Thus the celebration of the

Lord's Table, the Mass, represents and continues in our midst the one great sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross and is offered to make reparation for the sins of mankind.

B. A Memorial and Remembrance:

During the reformation period a man by the name of Zwingli declared, "Christ, who suffered Himself once on the cross, is the sufficient and perpetual sacrifice for the sins of all believers. Therefore the Mass is no sacrifice, but a commemoration of the one sacrifice upon the cross and a seal of the one redemption through Christ." Many view the Lord's Supper as symbolical and memorial in character. There is no change in the substance of the wine or bread. There is no saving grace attached to them. Christ is only real as He is made real by the Holy Spirit to the eye of faith.

5. The Purpose of the Lord's Supper:

We may state the purpose of the Lord's Supper negatively and positively.

A. Negatively:

We do not believe that participation in the Lord's Supper has any saving value for one's soul or is in any way a means of forgiveness. The Lord's Table is not an unbloody sacrifice; rather it is a memorial to the sacrifice which has already been made once for all. It is a, physical act which has spiritual meaning much the same as two lovers kissing or the saluting of a flag. The actual words of the institution were spoken in Aramaic. This is a Semitic language which lends itself very easily to figures of speech, undertones, and overtones of meaning. We shall not attach any real significance to the verb in the Authorized Version, "is", for the verb "to be" was omitted in the spoken language and left the meaning to be inferred. Jesus said, "*This bread, my body.*" Moffit tries to bring out the sense by translating "means." The key lies in the Passover interpretation of Deut. 16:3. While the Jews say the bread and wine in the Paschal cups stand for past redemption, Jesus stands up before them and declares that the bread in His hands stands for His body which will shortly be slain as a Passover Lamb. His blood, recalling the Old Testament sacrificial economy, is represented there in the cup before their eyes. The dish is invested with new meaning. A new exodus is being provided for. Jesus

said, *"This stands for my body."* He stood body intact before their eyes. He meant the words figuratively as when He said He was a door, and a vine. The Lord's Supper we do not believe to be an offering for sin.

Another view which was not mentioned earlier holds that the body of Christ in accordance with the will of God is substantially in, with, and under the elements. This was the view held by Luther who insisted on the bodily presence in the elements. This is known as consubstantiation and it is the doctrine that the bread and cup become the body and blood of the Lord after the communicant partakes of them, the elements themselves remaining unchanged before. While I am speaking of what others believe again, let me say that according to John Calvin sought for a position somewhere between those mentioned by saying that while a believer received visible elements which were bread and wine both before and after assimilation, he also by faith received spiritual realities. Christ did not descend to us, but we ascend to Him and come in spiritual contact with the entire person of Christ. To Calvin it was more than a memorial service, but not a sacrifice for sin. It was, however, a means of grace. We do not believe that these views are what the Scriptures teach. It is not a question of God's ability to change the elements nor is it beyond His power to descend to them. Is this what God does? We believe these views present a larger miracle than the Bible warrants our believing in.

B. Positively:

1. The Lord's Table is first a remembrance, a simple recollection. Jesus said, *"This do in remembrance of me."* (I Corinthians 11:24-25) As we gather around the table in meditation we are to dismiss from our minds the cares of everyday life and fix our attention completely on Jesus, calling to remembrance His death on the cross for us. We are so prone to forget Calvary that the Lord in His gracious wisdom has given us something to do in order that we never forget.
2. The Lord's Table was given for our spiritual nourishment and inspiration. Just as certain foods are necessary to physical wellbeing, so we need spiritual foods to nourish the spiritual man within. Prayer, Bible study, and fellowship are a few of these, but also as an

important part of our spiritual diet there is the Communion Table. We should not neglect the Lord's Table.

3. The Lord's Table is a means of fellowship with one another in Christ. It is a sign of the union of Christians with Christ, their head. It is the Body of Christ personally appropriating Christ's death. Scriptures which are meaningful here are ; I Corinthians 10:17, 11:24.
 4. The Lord's Table is for the purpose of self examination or taking personal spiritual inventory. We will speak more of this when we approach the Table discerningly. (I Corinthians 5:8, 11:28)
 5. The Lord's Table is a means of preaching the Gospel. Jesus said, "*For as often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup ye do shew the Lord's death till He come.*" (I Corinthians 11:26) The word translated "*shew*" is actually in the original language the word for "*preach*". "*You do preach the Lord's death until He come,*" is what Jesus said. We need to realize that each time we gather around the Lord's Table and partake of that bread and lift that cup that the gallows of the cross is once again being hoisted before the eyes of a watching world. We are actually preaching a sermon in those silent moments. We are saying Christ died for our (and your) sins.
- Lastly.** The Lord's Table is a token and pledge of the Lord's coming. "*Till He come*" is the way the Bible describes it. (I Corinthians 11:26) The Table thus looks to the past and what Christ has done to the present in reflection and testimony and to the future when He comes in glory.

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