

SIX VIEWS OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

It was the night of the Passover and the Lord Jesus was about to die upon Calvary the next day. On that solemn and emotional night, He gathered His closest disciples behind closed doors in a borrowed room in Jerusalem to eat the sacred supper of the Hebrew people. As He did so, He took a loaf of bread and a cup of fruit of the vine, and He thus closed the book on a centuries old commemoration, and He established a new memorial which would be called 'The Lord's Supper.' Today, on this Lord's Day, multitudes of baptized believers will gather in places of worship, and will surround that table where Jesus sat so long ago, to perpetuate a memorial that Jesus said should be done until He comes again. What does it mean? Why did Jesus institute it? Why do we benefit from it? What do we learn from it? The ancient church at Corinth had abandoned the original design of that simple feast that Jesus had set up, and had become gluttonously feasting on something that could not even be called the Lord's Supper any longer. So, the apostle Paul had a very stern rebuke for them and a divinely inspired reminder of what the Lord had intended when He first showed His disciples how His death was to be remembered in eating the Lord's Supper.

I Corinthians 11:23-30 "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."

You know, the Lord's Supper is one of the most fundamental ordinances given to the church to practice and perpetuate. Jesus said that we are to do it "*oft*" and on a recurring basis, and we are to do so "*until He comes again.*" It's interesting that as primary as communion is to the Christian life and to the worship of Christ's church, and as widely practiced as it has been since the church's beginning 2000 years ago, there are only about four passages of scripture that tell us much about what the Lord's supper is, and how it should be done. Three of those passages are parallel accounts of the same event by three gospel writers: Matthew 26, Mark 14 and Luke 22. Later, the apostle Paul was allowed to look into that upper room, by divine inspiration, and he recorded its events as though he was there that night. He tells us what Jesus did and why we are to do it in that way. In so doing, Paul teaches us that when we sit at Christ's table, we look in at least six directions, and they each give us a very clear view of the design and purpose of the sacred supper.

1. The Lord's Supper looks **upward** for inspiration.

I Corinthians 11:23 "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you..."

We observe the Lord's Supper by inspiration, or by Christ's divine authority. The reason that Paul was writing about this in the first place was because of how the Corinthian church had corrupted the feast. Instead of a simple and solemn participation and remembrance of the death of Jesus, it had become a gluttonous feast, and the point was entirely missed by these weak and carnally minded Christians. The result was that the Lord was not being honored by what they were doing, so Paul, in calling them back to the original design of the Lord's Supper, told them that the pattern that he was about to lay out was not his, but rather was received from the Lord. In other words, it was very important that they observe the Lord's Supper in exactly the same way that Jesus did with His disciples that night, and for the same purpose that He established it to begin with. Did you know that it is still important that we observe the Lord's Supper according to the pattern that Jesus gave, even though very few actually do? Friend, The Bible is very, very plain and consistent about what Jesus did and how Jesus did it. When Jesus took the bread and the cup, He told His disciples to do it as He had showed them. That was a command of our Lord. You often see the words of Jesus etched on the front of communion tables, "*This do in remembrance of me.*" Think about what that means. Think about what the Lord was saying. Some will say, "Well, it really doesn't matter how we observe the Lord's Supper as long as we're remembering Jesus." But Jesus said, "***This do in remembrance of me.***" In other words, "Do what I have showed you, and do it in memory of me." Now, when Paul said that he had received these things from the Lord, he meant that although he was not personally present on that Passover night before Christ's death, he had received this teaching by inspiration, and by his apostolic authority, he was instructing these wayward believers in the proper observance of the Lord's Supper. In fact, look at verses 1 and 2 of the same chapter:

I Corinthians 11:1-2 "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ. Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you."

That's pretty plain. By keeping the ordinances as he had delivered them, they were to do exactly what he had written for them to do, in exactly the way that he had instructed them to do it. That is in keeping with what Jesus told His disciples that night, "*This do in remembrance of me.*" So that brings us to the question: What did Jesus do? How did Jesus institute the Lord's Supper? It is very important that we carefully note this. All four accounts of this event tell us the same thing about what Jesus did when He communed with the disciples. Let's look at Matthew's account, since it appears first in the canonized scriptures.

Matthew 26:26- 29 "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. But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

Matthew tells us that Jesus took bread. The word 'bread' is a translation of the Greek word 'artos' which Jesus actually used, and it means *a loaf of bread*. Well, what kind of loaf of bread was it? This was the Passover, and no leaven was to be used, besides the fact that leaven would not be a very fit symbol of Jesus' body, since leaven typifies sin in the scriptures, so we conclude that Jesus took a loaf of unleavened bread. Next, the word 'cup' is translated from the Greek word 'poterion' which means *a drinking vessel*. When Jesus said, "*Drink ye all of it,*" the word 'of' is the Greek word 'ec' meaning *from or out of*. So, in the language which the Holy Spirit used when he inspired Matthew to write what occurred, He said that Jesus took the drinking vessel and gave thanks, and gave it (the drinking vessel) to them saying, "Drink ye all from (or out of) it." That's literally what Matthew's account is telling us. What were they to drink? Verse 29 tells us that it was "*fruit of the vine.*"

So, let's put all of that together. Jesus took a loaf of unleavened bread. He gave thanks for it. He partook of, or broke it, and gave the rest to His disciples to also break and eat. He then took a cup containing fruit of the vine, He gave thanks for it, He drank from it, and He gave it to the disciples and told them to all drink from it. What was *it*? What Jesus gave them. What did Jesus give them? A *poterion*, a drinking vessel, filled with *fruit of the vine*. Mark's account tells us that when the disciples took the cup that "*they all drank of (from or out of) it.*" (Mark 14:23) That's very simple. So simple, in fact, that it takes a seminary-educated preacher to mess it up. Yet, thousands of churches, including unfortunately, many churches of Christ, will gather today and use multiple loaves and individual cups, and that's a practice that is only a little over a century old. You see, in the Lord's Supper, we're to look upward for its inspiration, doing it by His divine authority and not man's. It's the Lord's table, not mine. The Lord set His table and it's not up to me or you or somebody else to set the Lord's table. Now, I'm very aware of the metonymical use of the word 'cup' in scripture and in general language. That is, when the word 'cup' is used figuratively to denote what is *in the cup*. But the fact that a word is used as a metonymy does not mean that the literal use ceases to exist. There's really no mistaking what Jesus did with His disciples. The narrative is very plain and what Jesus told us to do is also very plain, to do as HE did it. The "mystery" is removed if we were to place an 's' after the word 'cup.' Choose any one of the four accounts and read it changing the word 'cup' to 'cups' and see if it would become clear to you what the word is referring to. "And he took the cups and gave thanks and gave them to the disciples saying, Drink ye all of them." If the Bible said that, it would mean the exact same thing, except you would have more than one drinking vessel involved. Also, if the Bible actually said that, anybody would point to that passage to justify individual cups in the communion. They'd say, "See there! Jesus took more than one cup!" But, you see, Jesus didn't say 'cups.' He said 'cup.' And if we follow the Lord's pattern, we'll not only use unleavened bread and fruit of the vine, but we'll partake of those elements the same way that Jesus instructed His disciples to do that night long ago.

2. The Lord's Supper looks **back** in commemoration.

I Corinthians 11:25 "...this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me."

The Lord's Supper is primarily a memorial for the suffering and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. It is a solemn feast, not a gluttonous celebration as the Corinthians were making it out to be. Jesus Christ and His death and agony on the cross was to be their focus as they partook. What do those elements of His Supper signify? What do they commemorate? It is important to note that there are three things, not two, specifically mentioned that should be brought to mind as we commune:

- a) Jesus took bread and He said, Take, eat; this is my body (verse 24)
- b) and c) This cup is the new testament in my blood (verse 25)

The 'new testament' here isn't really referring to the twenty-seven canonized books of scripture, but rather what those books reveal, that is, the covenant or testament of the Lord Jesus. That covenant, or agreement, was sealed or ratified by the shed blood of Christ. The 'New Testament' and the 'blood' that ratified the New Testament are not the same thing, but they have an unbreakable relationship. And our joint participation in this new covenant or agreement made of force by Christ's redeeming blood, is beautifully represented when the cup of the Lord passes from hand to hand and we all drink of that cup, which Paul also refers to as 'the cup of blessing' (I Corinthians 10:16). So, those elements that Christ used, and instructed us to use by His example, are to signify three essential things to our salvation: His unbroken body, represented by a loaf of unleavened bread, and the new covenant, brought into force by His shed blood, represented by a cup of fruit of the vine which we share in His memory.

3. The Lord's Supper looks **around** in participation.

I Corinthians 11:20-22 "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."

It is a sharing, or joint participation, in these elements and signified blessings. The word 'communion' actually means 'a common union or common sharing.' Isn't it strange that that's what the word 'communion' means, yet in the name of communion, we now have "individual communion?" In some respects, that was what Paul was rebuking the Corinthians for doing.

I Corinthians 11:33-34 "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."

They were eating a meal with no thought or concern for one another. Paul told them to tarry for one another. They had missed the point of the supper altogether and were abusing it beyond words. Paul reminded them that it is a simple joint participation in the things that signify Christ's death upon the cross.

4. The Lord's Supper looks **inward** in examination.

I Corinthians 11:27-29 "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."

We are to commune as we examine our own hearts. Now, we may look around in joint participation, but we are to also look inward in self-examination. It's not my place to examine another, but to examine myself. For what? For the state of my own heart, my own mind, observing the sacred feast. The Lord's Supper is to be a very serious time of reflection upon the cross, and my relationship to the cross. In fact, because the Corinthians were not doing that, Paul said that many of them were "*weak and sickly among you, and many sleep*" (verse 30). He's talking about their spiritual state. They were spiritually weak and sickly and even asleep because they weren't discerning the Lord. Why would Paul say that? Well, when you don't live your life in the shadow of the cross, there is no life. The Christian has to stay near the cross. What a wonderful thing, that the Lord in His wisdom left us a beautiful and simple service to weekly draw us to Calvary for a time of reflection and introspection!

I Corinthians 11:31 "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."

In other words, we need that time of introspection in view of the cross to be sure that we live our lives in humble gratitude for Christ's sacrifice. We should note what Paul was saying when he spoke of partaking of the Lord's Supper "unworthily." This is an adverb, not an adjective, and it describes the *way* that some partake, and not the partaker himself. While it is true that the Lord's Supper is only for baptized believers, disciples of Christ who have received the benefits of His death, Paul is not saying that we must be worthy to partake. That would leave us ALL out in the cold, I'm afraid. Paul is pronouncing a strong rebuke on those who were not partaking *in a worthy manner*: those who were not seeing the Lord's Supper as a commemoration of Christ's death. The communion is a time for surveying the cross, and the benefit that the Christian receives from that is immeasurable and irreplaceable!

5. The Lord's Supper looks **outward** in proclamation AND
6. The Lord's Supper looks **forward** in anticipation.

I Corinthians 11:26 "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come."

That's wonderful! It's not only a solemn remembrance of a bloody and suffering event of the past, but it is a celebration of a triumphant future! You see, the church is to perpetually proclaim Jesus' death in taking the Lord's Supper, until the day when He splits the clouds and comes to take us to that great heavenly feast in the Father's house. Every time the church meets in communion, every time a disciple of Jesus Christ places that bread and that cup to his lips, he is preaching a sermon--that Jesus died and was buried; that redemption, forgiveness and salvation are found in His death and in the new covenant; that Jesus didn't remain in that grave, but arose again in triumph! He reigns at the right hand of God. He is alive and powerful and in control, reigning in His kingdom. AND He's on His way. You see, the Lord's Supper IS a monument to His suffering, but it's also a momentous expectation of His second coming, reminding us week by week to not only live our lives in the shadow of His cross, but to keep our eyes pointed to the eastern sky, where one day soon, Jesus will rend the heavens, step out on a cloud and call us home!

Now, I want to focus on some questions that might arise from this discussion.

1. Why a weekly observance of the Lord's Supper? Why do the churches of Christ observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday?

I realize that there are many congregations that observe communion infrequently. Some do so quarterly or semi-annually or annually. There are those who reserve the communion for what they deem to be a 'special occasion' or perhaps some religious holiday. But, how often *should* the church observe the Lord's Supper? Does the Bible give us any indication of that? First of all, we are told to eat the Lord's Supper on a recurring basis. That is a commandment of the Lord (I Corinthians 11:26). In other words, it's not a one-time observance, but it is to be done on a recurring basis. On top of that, Luke records the very earliest history of the church by saying this:

Acts 2:42 "And they (the disciples) continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."

Now, that term "*breaking of bread*" was used by the early disciples to refer, on many occasions, to the Lord's Supper. So, Luke tells us that these people, after they were baptized into Christ, continued in the work and worship that the Lord gave to His people in fellowship and breaking of bread, and they did so *stedfastly*. That means *faithfully* or *regularly*. It

means *unwaveringly*. Luke later records that this was still the practice of the church that was located in Troas.

Acts 20:7 “And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them.”

He shows that the purpose of the church coming together on Sunday was to eat the Lord’s Supper. It seems that was the focus or the main impetus of their gathering together. What had happened in this passage was that Paul delayed his journey in order to assemble with the church when they came together that Sunday, the Lord’s Day, to break bread and eat the Lord’s Supper. Now, you might say, “But the Bible doesn’t say that you have to commune every Sunday.” Well, it’s true that the Bible never uses the specific sentence, “You must come together to commune every Sunday.” What the Bible DOES say is that the Lord’s Supper is to be done regularly, that it was done *stedfastly*, that it is to be done recurrently. And we also know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the early disciples followed that command on the Lord’s Day, or on the first day of the week. Keep that in mind, because I want you to remember that there was another important observance of the Jews under the Old Testament, namely this:

Exodus 20:8 “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.”

That was, of course, one of the Ten Commandments. The Sabbath was a very holy day to God’s people. Well, do you think that when Moses inscribed that commandment on those tablets of stone and revealed them unto the people, that the people said, “Moses, this is a little vague. God didn’t give them enough information. After all, there are fifty-two sabbaths in a year, so far as the seventh day of the week, so which ones do you mean? Would it be okay if we just observed ONE sabbath each year? Could we ‘keep the sabbath day’ by doing it ONE sabbath each year? Or maybe TWO? Or FOUR, once every quarter or so, we’ll make sure to take a sabbath day and keep it holy.”? Well, NO! Every week had a sabbath, and it was to be kept holy. When God said, “*Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy,*” there was no question in their minds that He meant when it comes the seventh day of the week, that day is to be set aside and kept holy to the Lord. In fact, a faithful Jew didn’t dare overlook any sabbath! Now, add to this that early church history shows that for almost the first three hundred years after Jesus established the church, the disciples observed the communion on a weekly basis. The early church came together and observed this sacred and solemn feast every Sunday. They did that, and if we’re to follow their example, when the first day of the week comes, shouldn’t we be found in an assembly of Christians breaking bread?

2. If it were important for us to follow the Lord’s example in using one cup in communion, wouldn’t we have to use the exact same cup that Jesus used?

The answer is no, and here's why. The vast majority of people who commune believe that it is significant that Jesus used bread and fruit of the vine. I would assume that maybe you would agree with that, too. Most of us probably wouldn't even think of using hamburger steak and iced tea to observe the Lord's Supper. That would be profane! Blasphemy against the pattern of the Lord. Why? Because of Christ's example and the representative properties of those things which He chose to make up the supper. Now if THOSE THINGS are important, is it necessary to use the same loaf of bread that Jesus and His disciples used? Is it necessary to obtain grapes from the same vineyard that Jesus used? Of course not. Those are merely the types of elements that Jesus used and specified when He established the pattern of His supper. The same is true of the cup. There is no magical property in the cup, any more than there is in the bread or the grape juice. But those are merely the emblems that Jesus selected to represent to us the life-giving realities of His body, His blood and the new covenant. We can follow Jesus' pattern exactly when we do the same things in the same way that the Bible reveals the Jesus did them that night when He instituted them.

3. If what you say is true, then why do the vast majority of churches today use more than one loaf and more than one cup?

In short, for the same reasons that they do many other things that aren't found in the scriptures: change or innovation. When you look at the history of God's people, you find that things don't remain as God gave them for very long. Man changes those things, and the communion is no different. The practice of using more than one loaf and more than one cup is really a relatively modern innovation. Nearly every scholar will agree that Jesus used ONE, and that's fairly obvious from the scriptures we've studied. If we just let the Bible speak, what does it say about that? The fact is, individual communion cups weren't used until a little over one hundred years ago. You won't read about them in the Bible. A doctor by the name of J.G. Thomas invented the individual communion set in Lima, Ohio in the 1890's. In 1950, a preacher among the churches of Christ named G.C. Brewer introduced them to a congregation of the church of Christ in Tennessee, and the practice spread throughout many of the churches of Christ in America and around the world. Brother Brewer didn't introduce them because he found a passage where Jesus used them; he advocated them because he thought it would be an improvement upon what the church had practiced for almost 1900 years. But, friend, they are in contradiction of the design and purpose of the Lord's Supper as Jesus instituted it two millennia ago. Won't you be content to follow the Lord's pattern? Jesus said, "*This do in remembrance of me.*" I hope that if you are a baptized believer in Christ, you will plan to assemble this Lord's Day with a group of Christians in a scriptural observance of this sacred feast.

