

Friday, March 25, 2016 - I Remember Once a Year?

At the 1982 Freed Hardeman lectures, Gary Workman presented a beautiful study of the Lord's Supper. While the entire article is much too large for this space, below is a summary of significant points we need to remember.

The Lord's supper was instituted by our Lord himself "in the night in which he was betrayed" (1 Cor. 11:23). This event is recorded not only by Paul (as a single incident out of the life of Jesus) but also in three of the gospel accounts (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25 and Luke 22:19-20). John does not record the giving of the Lord's supper but gives us many additional details of that meeting in the upper room (John 13--14) and of the later discussion and prayer which occurred that night (John 15--17) before Jesus arrived in Gethsemane.

The Scriptures are not silent about who should partake at the Lord's table. When Jesus inaugurated the supper he distributed it "to the disciples" (Matt. 26:26). He commanded "them" to eat and drink (Mark 14:22-23), specifying these privileges as "for you" (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:24). The supper was not given to unbelievers.

When Paul wrote on the subject, he addressed "the church" (1 Cor. 1:2). Therefore, it was specifically Christians to whom Paul referred when he said: "I received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you" (1 Cor. 11:23). Those who partake are to be in the "one body" (1 Cor. 10:17). It is for the "brethren" (1 Cor. 11:33).

Those who participate in this memorial of his death are to be those who have previously been united into that death through baptism (Rom. 6:3-5). The Corinthians to whom Paul wrote did not presumptuously approach the Lord's table uninvited. These people were those who were evangelized and who "hearing, believed and were baptized" (Acts 18:8). They had been washed, sanctified and justified (1 Cor. 6:11) and had come into the kingdom (1 Cor. 15:24). To such Jesus said: "I appoint unto you a kingdom ... that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom" (Luke 22:29-30). He said that those who thus commune would do so "in my Father's kingdom" (Matt. 26:29).

There are those who assume that the Lord's supper may properly be eaten on any day of the week and as frequently or infrequently as desired. It is claimed that both Jesus and Paul left it up to Christians to partake "as often" as they wish (1 Cor. 11:25-26). However, it is our conviction that the Scriptures are more restrictive than this -- specifying both the day and the frequency. One does not necessarily arrive at the truth of any Bible subject without considering all that is said from every pertinent passage. While we have no quoted words from Jesus as to the proper day of observance, we do have information elsewhere. Acts 20:7 tells us that it was on "the first day of the week" that the church "gathered together to break bread."

In the New Testament the term "breaking of bread" refers to two separate activities: the Lord's supper and a common meal. The reader must distinguish the one from the other by observing syntax (sentence structure), accompanying vocabulary, context and logic. In Acts 20:11, the word "eaten" (literally "tasting -- [*@geusamenos*]) is never used of the Lord's supper (where we have [*@fago*] or [*@esthio*]), but is used in reference to eating a common meal out of hunger (Acts 10:10; 23:14; Luke 14:24). We can see that the early Christians worshipped together (Acts 20:7) and often ate together (Acts 20:11). A similar distinction must be made in Acts 2. Acts 2:42 refers to the Lord's Supper. Here the syntax is significant -- "the breaking of the bread." Also, the entire verse speaks of spiritual activities. But in Acts 2:46 we have common meals: "And breaking bread at home, they took their food with gladness and singleness of heart." It is therefore incorrect and completely unjustified for some interpreters to assert that the early Christians observed the Lord's supper "day by day," for this verse does not so indicate.

The Lord's supper is to be eaten only on "the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10), "the first day of the week" -- the day of his resurrection (Luke 24:1). Moreover, it should be eaten every Sunday. It is not "as often as" one likes but "as often as" the Lord wants (1 Cor. 11:25-26). The assembly for worship -- including the Lord's supper -- was to be "upon the first day of the week" (1 Cor. 16:2). This means every first day, just as "Remember the sabbath day" (Exo. 20:8) meant every sabbath. Faithful Christians of the early church "continued stedfastly" in their observance of the Lord's supper (Acts 2:42) rather than having it just once every few months. They did not forsake that assembly (Heb. 10:25).

The Lord's supper is not just a meaningless ritual, nor is it a "sacrament" whereby we obtain grace or forgiveness of sins. Its purpose is three-fold. A commemoration of the past. We often have a memorial for those who depart this earthly scene, and we strive to fulfill whatever wishes they leave behind. This supper was Jesus' dying request. It was set up as a memorial of his death. As Jesus distributed the bread, he said: "This is my body which is given for you. This do in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19; cf. 1 Cor. 11:24). Likewise, he said: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. This do ... in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11:25). The Lord's Supper is therefore primarily a memorial of the sacrificial death of Jesus in which his body and blood were given.

A participation in the present. As we eat and drink and remember, the Lord's supper becomes a "communion" of the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16). It is a spiritual participation in the death of our Lord, and Jesus is with us as we do it. He told his disciples that he would "drink it new" with them in the kingdom (Matt. 26:29; Mark 14:25). As we drink literally, Jesus drinks spiritually -- in a "new" kind of way (*[@kainos]*), and we commune together.

A declaration of the past and future. In our partaking of the Lord's supper we "proclaim the Lord's death" (1 Cor. 11:26). It stands as a declaration of our belief

in the cross to each other and to any observers who might be present. It further proclaims our faith in the certainty of the Lord's return, for we are to partake of it "till he come."

To gather around the Lord's table is a sacred privilege. May we never violate its form or profane its purpose. And may we ever strive to focus our attention on our crucified Lord as together we commune with him in his kingdom.

That death will be the focus of our next study.