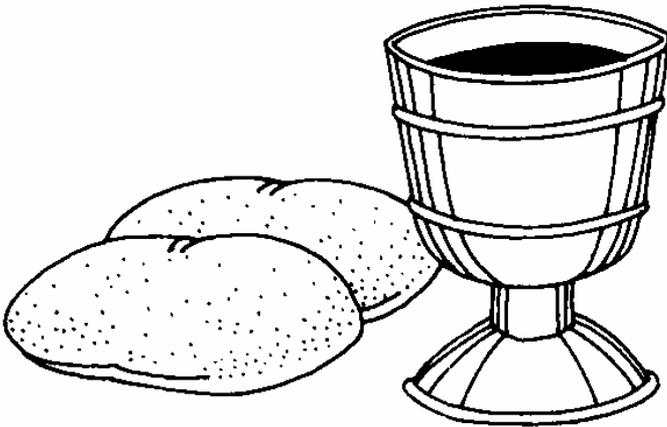


THE LORD'S SUPPER



by R. B. Shiflet

This study is written with a sincere prayer that it may be a means of drawing believers together in closer fellowship in spite of divisions that exist in our understanding of the Word of God. When any differences of opinion on a subject prevail among honest believers, it goes without saying that there is room for re-examination. This message will attempt to examine three aspects of the subject of the Lord's Supper; that is:

Communion Questions,
Communion Considerations,
and Communion Meditations.

COMMUNION QUESTIONS

It is a little known fact that the words, “The Lord’s Supper” appear only one time in the Bible and then they are used negatively—“When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord’s Supper” (I Corinthians 11:20). Literally, this passage says, “ye cannot eat the Lord’s Supper.” Yet, in spite of the fact that there is so little information in the Bible on this topic perhaps on no other doctrine are believers more divided. From high church observances of Holy Communion to the fundamentalist congregation that considers the ritual a fellowship service, there are many diverse practices in observing what is called “the Lord’s Supper.” May we raise the following questions and appeal to anyone for a clear cut Scriptural answer:

- How often should this Supper be taken? (There is not a shred of evidence to support the theory that references in Acts to “breaking bread from house to house” or breaking bread on “the first day of the week” imply a communion service.)
- Who is eligible to participate—should it be limited to members of a local congregation, or to those who are in doctrinal agreement with one another, or should it be open to all believers?
- Who is to decide whether the person desiring to partake is a true Christian and should be admitted, or is not saved and should therefore be excluded?
- Should the “cup” contain grape juice, or fermented wine? Is it permissible in countries which have no grapes to substitute lemon juice that has been colored red with cake coloring, as some of our missionaries in Africa have done?
- Should the bread be “crackers” especially prepared for this ritual by some church supply house, or should it be one loaf of unleavened bread (I Corinthians 10: 17)?
- Should there be one cup, or individual cups?

- Should those partaking sit around a table, as our Lord and the disciples did, should they kneel at a chancel rail or altar, or should they sit in their pews and be served?
- Where are the signs of I Corinthians 11:27-30—the judgments that are pronounced against those who participate unworthily? Let’s face it—if everyone in America who partakes unworthily of this sacrament on any one Sunday were stricken with disease or death, as they were in Paul’s Day, there would not be enough of their fellow church members left to bury the dead!

These questions are raised, not for the sake of debating, or stirring up confusion, but to cause Christians to think. These are valid questions. Can you give a Scriptural answer, or must you resort to customs and traditions? The questions can easily be answered (although the answers will vary greatly) in the light of various traditions, but can they be answered with a direct statement from the Scriptures? If the reader takes the attitude, “it doesn’t really matter as to the frequency, the method, the elements, etc.,” he should be reminded that the Apostle Paul indicated that such things certainly mattered when he wrote to the Corinthians to rebuke their wrong observances. Those who partook unworthily were inviting judgments upon themselves (I Corinthians 11:27-30).

COMMUNION CONSIDERATIONS

Let us consider some basic facts relating to the Corinthian believers. While they were referred to as “the body of Christ and members in particular (literally, ‘in part’)” (I Corinthians 12:27), the Apostle Paul recognized certain members as saved Jews and others as saved Gentiles. Note, for example, chapter 10, where he addresses saved Jews, reminding them of the deeds of their Hebrew fathers in the wilderness. In chapter 12, he addresses saved Gentiles, saying, “Ye know that ye were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols.” It is obvious that at that time it had not yet been revealed that the middle wall of partition had been taken away, for during that time saved Jews were required to circumcise their children, keep the entire Mosaic Law, etc., while saved Gentiles had no such requirements (see Acts 21:18-26; 15:28-29; Galatians 5:3). The unknown tongues and other sign gifts were in operation (I Corinthians 14); the gifts of healing, etc. were being practiced.

Will the reader please consider this. As long as God was dealing with Israel as a nation—and this was during the entire period covered by the book of Acts, until the Apostle Paul in Rome finally pronounced judgment upon Israel (Acts 28:25-28)—He permitted the saved Jews to continue their fasts, feasts, and rituals. (Note: Acts 18:21; 16:3; 20:6; 20:16, etc.) The observance that is called the Lord’s Supper was clearly linked with one of these Jewish feasts, namely, the Passover (Matthew 26:17-29; Luke 22:7-20; I Corinthians 11:23-26). It is associated with the New Covenant, (I Corinthians 11:25) and the New Covenant was made with the house of Israel and the house of Judah (Jeremiah 31:31), not the body of Christ. The New Covenant was prophesied, whereas the truth concerning the body of Christ was unprophesied (Ephesians 3:1-10; Colossians 1:24-29).

Are we not told that just as the Jews had across the years observed the Passover annually (and all the details as to time and

method were clearly recorded in Exodus 12 and other passages) as a memorial of their deliverance from Egyptian bondage, just so the believing Jews of that transitional period when they were continuing to observe the Passover, were no longer to observe it as a memorial to deliverance from Egypt, but as a memorial to their deliverance from sin through the death of their Paschal Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ! What an opportunity these believing Jews had to witness to their unsaved Jewish neighbors at this feast! There is no evidence that a Gentile—even a saved Gentile—partook of this supper (Note: Exodus 12:45-48). During the Acts period, the promise was held out to Israel that if they would repent as a nation and accept their Messiah, He would return and restore to them their kingdom (Note: Acts 3:19-21; I Corinthians 7:29-31). In view of this possible imminent return, these Jewish believers were presenting to their unbelieving Jewish friends, a testimony or memorial of Christ's death each time they observed the Passover (I Corinthians 11:23-26).

But Israel as a whole did not accept the testimony concerning Christ, and they were set aside. With their setting aside, sign gifts ceased, external ritual stopped, water baptism was replaced by Spirit baptism, circumcision was no longer to be practiced, and the coming of Christ to set up a kingdom in which He would take the cup and the bread with His Jewish disciples (Matthew 26:29) was postponed.

Since Acts 28:28, there have been no sign gifts (contrast I Corinthians 12:1-31 with Ephesians 4:11), we are no longer recognized as believing Jews and believing Gentiles, but as a joint body, neither Jew nor Gentile. The old middle wall of partition has been broken down. Our calling is spiritual; our position is “far above all;” our hope is the Blessed Hope of His glorious appearing, and our appearing with Him in the glory. Imagine a believer today who has been taught the truth of Colossians 2:14-17; 20-23; and 3:1-4 (please read these verses carefully) leaving his heavenly position to quibble over such mundane, carnal things as the cup

and the bread of the Jewish Passover! Note these precious verses:

"Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; and having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it. Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days; which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ." (Col 2:14-17)

"Wherefore, if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why as though living in the world are ye subject to ordinances, (touch not; taste not; handle not; which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honor to the satisfying of the flesh." (Col. 2:20-23)

"If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above where Christ sitteth on the right I hand of God. Set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory." (Col. 3:1-4)

Surely, these verses speak for themselves and offer a striking contrast between the earthly ritual and ceremony of Israel, that was permitted to continue even among believing Jews throughout the Acts period, and the member of the body of Christ today who stands complete in Christ, having a circumcision made without hands, a spiritual baptism which is the operation of God, and communion and fellowship with our risen and exalted Head in

heavenly places where we are now seated together (Note: Colossians 2:10-11; Ephesians 2:4-7). There is not a line of Scripture in the letters written after the transition period of Acts that even hints at the observance of the Lord's Supper. Those who would have us partake of these elements are hard pressed to answer their brethren who are attempting to revive the glossalalia, or speaking in tongues, since the chief passages for speaking in tongues occur in the same letter in which are found the references used for observing communion. Let us leave the shadows of traditions and step into the full sunlight of God's grace.

COMMUNION MEDITATIONS

How do we “take communion” today? Every time believers gather in their homes or in the assembly and break the bread of life (the Word of God) they are having communion with the Father and the Son through the Spirit, and are having communion with one another. Possibly there is another application which we miss, which God would have us remember. Each time we gather with our families at meal time and pause to thank God for His goodness in providing us with the food we should be reminded of our blessed Lord’s sacrifice for us. Thus, instead of a ritualistic meal in a “church” gathering that is so foreign to the Scriptural teaching, we can, three times a day, as we “break bread” at our dining tables in the home with the family, “shew forth His death till He come.” Admittedly, this is an application, not an interpretation, but it has been a blessing to the writer.

This meditation is offered to the Berean reader with one motive in mind—a challenge to study the Word on a difficult subject. It is the writer’s sincere conviction that every Christian should stand for his belief, yet remain open-minded when it comes to questions such as this one.

What should be our attitude toward our kindred in Christ who differ with us on this question? Above all, it should be an attitude of love and respect. Certainly, this should never be a barrier to fellowship. One of the greatest of hindrances to making “all men see what is the dispensation of the mystery” is strife among the brethren over differences in understanding. Let us who rejoice in the revelation given by the Risen Christ to the Apostle Paul not try to force our thinking on one another in these matters in which we may differ, but rejoicing in the many, many truths we hold in common, let us unite our efforts to reach the lost with the gospel of the grace of God and to teach believers the joy of completeness in Christ. At the same time, let us continue to study in love as noble Bereans, the things on which we differ. Let the Christian who

does not believe that the literal cup and the bread are for us today, not try to take them from his fellow Christian who has not seen this, and let the believer who takes the communion not try to force it upon one who rejoices in his completeness in Christ apart from all ordinances. May it never in any way be a bar to fellowship!