

The Significance of the Last Supper

How do we approach the Lord's Table? What do we reflect upon as we eat the bread and drink the Cup of Thanksgiving? Do we think of redemption? Do we meditate about forgiveness? Do we consider God's judgment? **This Supper should tell us that we deserve God's judgment of punishment a thousandfold.** This Meal should cause us to pray seriously: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). In this Meal, God exemplifies pardon before the eyes of each participant. We are ever conscious that He implemented/implements forgiveness on the Cross. **When we receive forgiveness through the Cross of Jesus, we can never remain unchanged.** This Feast unfolds the deepest mystery of the Gospel of Christ—forgiveness. When our relationship with God is made new through the Cross, our relationship with others will never be the same. This fellowship Meal is a constant reminder of the word of pardon and the deed of reconciliation.

Many Christians do not seem to appreciate the true significance of the Lord's Supper. The Communion is a venerated custom that the body of Christ has participated in since the time Christ instituted His memorial Meal during His last Passover meal with His disciples. Some churches celebrate this Feast on a weekly basis, but, on the other hand, there are churches that neglect this Institution, at least they do not observe it very often. **Is the Eucharist one of the dying branches within the Christian community? Is this Supper sacrificed to the times? Has it lost its meaning? Does the Lord's Supper speak a message to us?** What is this communication of fellowship in the body and blood of Christ? **Does this Meal, to us, signify unity among God's people?** Does this Meal remind us of the priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17? Listen to the prayer of the Son of God as He prepares for His "finished" work of redemption for lost humanity—death upon the Cross:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³ I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-23)

Is the Communion a constant reminder to us of the message of the Cross? Christian unity can only be found in the proclamation that Jesus is God's Way of salvation. It is only in the preaching of the Cross that we can find true unity. **In this Meal**, God has a meaning for His people. God speaks to His saints through this activity—eating and drinking in remembrance of Christ. Paul, as he writes to the Corinthians, gives a saying from Christ that neither Matthew nor Mark records: "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:24). This Institution of remembrance has always been a constant reminder to the Church that God lays upon the hearts of His servants the message of the Gospel in and through the sharing of the "bread" and "wine."

We cannot partake of this Repast without a consciousness of our need of redemption. This Meal binds us to one another. God reaches out to us, not just through the verbal preaching of the Word, but through this act of commemoration in which His grace is reenacted, as it were, in our hearts. In this act, God also addresses His children through the eye as well as through the verbal telling of the story of redemption. The Lord's Supper is a reminder that God reaches out to the down-and-out. This Meal is an unbroken reminder of God sending His Son to seek and to save the lost. This Feast is a firm reminder that even in divorce, God is still reaching out to heal and to forgive the broken hearted. This Communion is for sinners saved by grace.

The phrase “in remembrance of me” calls for focus upon the Death of Christ. The congregations of Christ can never get away from the Jesus of history. Whenever the local church assembles, there is, and must be, a corporate memory of Him who came to rescue us from condemnation. The Lord's Supper is a constant announcement of the Incarnate God. Paul uses the Greek word *ἀνάμνησις* (*anamnēsis*, reminder, remembrance) in 1 Corinthians 11:24, 25 to call attention to reflection upon full-blown redemption. The first reference is to the bread and the second reference is to the cup (His blood). As we eat the bread and drink the cup, we stand between two worlds—the **past** and the **present**.

As Christians, we do not only ponder upon the past—Incarnation and Crucifixion—but we also look beyond and reflect upon Christ's glorification and His eternal kingdom (the present). The beyond is also found in 11:26: “For whenever you **eat this bread** and **drink this cup**, you **proclaim** the Lord's death **until** he comes” (AD 70). This statement does not indicate that Christians no longer observe the Supper. We can hardly reflect upon the phrase “until he comes” without a reflection upon Paul's closing words in this Epistle: “If anyone does not love the Lord—a curse be on him. Come, O Lord ” (16:22)! God's people continue (present) to celebrate this memorial as a symbol of the wedding that took place at the time of the coming of the New Heaven and new earth (Revelation 19:7-8; 21:1-4). Also, the Jesus' Meal is confirmation of Jesus' character as to the fulfillment concerning the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (see, John 13:19; 14:29; Isaiah 46:10).

As we gather around the Lord's Table today, we are bound up, as it were, with a corporate memory of real historical events, especially the ushering in of the New Jerusalem in AD 70 when Jesus came in judgment against apostate Judah (Hebrews 12:22-39). These emblems are constant reminders of (1) His betrayal by Judas, (2) His crucifixion upon Golgotha, (3) His empty tomb, (4) His appearance in the upper room after His resurrection, and (5) His final return with His angels “in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” (15:52, AD 70), which trumpet signaled God's wrath upon adulterous Judah for its rejection of His Messiah.

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul is mindful of the standing of the **past** as well as the **present**, that is to say, he is cognizant of the distinction between the memory and the hope—“Do this in remembrance of me” and “You proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.” In this present world, we still need something that lies beyond this life to make life meaningful and, at the same time, is a perpetual reflection upon Jesus as our atonement for the forgiveness of our sins.

b In Aramaic the expression *Come, O Lord* is *Marana tha*.

Since all human history is a pilgrimage, everyone needs a supernatural reality that reaches outside this earthly existence. **In the Lord's Supper**, there is a sense in which we are rehearsing what the early disciples of Jesus anticipated concerning His Second Coming, that is to say, when they, spiritually, would be gathered for the wedding feast around the Father's Table (see Matthew 22:1-11; 26:29; Revelation 19:7).

As we reflect upon the Lord's Supper, this consideration is an endless notice that Christianity is a historical religion. **In this Supper**, we are still reminded of His forecast concerning (1) the siege of Jerusalem, (2) the demolition of the Temple, (3) the destruction of the city, (4) the downfall of Judaism, and (5) the end of the Jewish theocratic state. The Lord's Supper confirms the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24—25; John 13:19; 14:29), which fulfillment occurred in its full bloom in His Second Coming with the overthrow of apostate Israel (the old heaven and earth, Hebrews 8:13).

In the Supper, we are still confronted with the mystery of time and the mystery of eternity. This Meal is a perpetual refresher of Christ offering His body as a sin offering for the sins of the world. **In this Supper**, we have confirmation of God's partial fulfillment of the prophets (Luke 21:20-24). The ultimate fulfillment of the prophets occurred in AD 70 with the fall of Jerusalem with the coming of the New Heaven and Earth. **In this Feast**, we come face to face with the eternal activity of God's passion for lost humanity. **In this memorial Meal**, we are conscious that we are now a part of the New Heavens and the new Earth—God's kingdom. The Communion is a constant reminder of the **past**, the **present**, and the **future**. **This Table Fellowship also paints a picture of how God bore our sins in the Cross of Christ.**

Emil Brunner (1889-1966) gives an outstanding analysis of forgiveness as he seeks to express the wonder and miracle of forgiveness, which is one of the numerous pictures of what the Lord's Supper is all about. In Emil Brunner's sermon on "The Merciful King and the Unforgiving Servant," he writes with penetrating insight:

When it happens to one of us that God forgives all his debts, a miracle happens, the greatest miracle of all. Forgiveness of sin is an even greater miracle than the resurrection of the dead. For the resurrected Lazarus had to die again. But a debt forgiven is forgiven for all eternity. **Forgiveness of sin means not only the breaking down of a barrier between God and us; it is at the same time the building up of the right relationship between the Creator and us.** Forgiveness of sin, acceptance of God's mercy, is nothing less than sonship, the establishment of communion between God and us. Whenever this occurs, something unheard of, a great miracle takes place. Truly the very opposite of the self-evident! The very opposite of what we may know in advance or by ourselves.¹ (Emphasis mine—bold)

In the Lord's Supper, we can hear the words of Jesus: "Go in peace, your sins are forgiven." As we eat the bread and drink the wine, we are reminded over and over that we have forgiveness of sins and friendship with God through the work of Christ upon the Cross. In this Banquet of the church, we also witness the performance of an act of fellowship, an act that signifies the unity of the body of Christ. **As a congregation, both men and women join as one**

¹ Emil Brunner, "The Merciful King and the Unforgiving Servant," in *Sowing and Reaping: The Parables of Jesus* (London: Trinity Press, 1964), 63

family in this corporate Festival. The Lord's Supper is a corporate act of the body of Christ. In this eating and drinking together, we witness Christian solidarity of fellowship within the body of Christ. Since the bread and wine are constant reminders of His grace, His mercy, and His peace, this realization should ever be a reminder of the corporate aspect of this unique fellowship in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. As we reflect upon this involvement, we can hardly fail to recall the words of Paul:

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?¹⁷ Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

Through this fellowship of eating and drinking, we find an expression of the truth that this relationship is grounded in God's action in the sending of His Son. In the Lord's Supper, we detect that each person is joined to the congregation of God's children in such a way that is not visualized through just the mere preaching of the Word. **In this form of proclamation, we perceive that this fellowship is grounded in an act of Jesus upon Calvary.** The deeper meaning of this Rite conveys the vicarious Passion and Death of Jesus upon the Cross for a dying humanity. **Taking part in this Feast reminds us that life is one continuous act of worship.** When we assemble to break bread together, this eating and drinking, as such, is the revealer of God's righteousness and love, which is about His justifying grace.

As stated above, the message of the Gospel is conveyed through the Lord's Supper. **In this Banquet,** God calls attention to the fact that Christ became a curse for the human race. This Supper rings a bell, as it were, that Christ was made sin for the world (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). **In this Supper,** we are aware that our life is **hidden with Christ** in God (Colossians 3:3). As we join in this Meal, we are reminded again and again that everything necessary for our forgiveness has been done "in" and "through" Jesus' Death upon the Tree. **In this eating and drinking, we discover that God has done what must be done to reconcile us unto Himself.** **In this Ceremonial Dinner,** we are ever mindful that God not only speaks the message of redemption, but that He also reenacts this message of redemption. We cannot take part in this Feast without a recollection of this costly forgiveness. **This Supper is a perpetual reminder that something had to be done about guilt (Romans 3:19-30).** In the Lord's Supper, we witness an inconceivable exchange—His Death for our life. It is through faith that we receive this grace that is portrayed in the Lord's Supper. We cannot assemble around this Table without reflection upon the Death of Jesus as the atoning act of God.²

What does this Supper mean to us? As we participate in this Meal, do we see the Passion of God for sinful humanity? Do we see God bearing the sins of the world? Do we see the Incarnation? Do we see the coming of eternity into the midst of time? The Lord's Supper is a persistent communication of God's scheme of redemption in and through Christ. F. J. Leenhardt says, "The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper derives its meaning from the conditions

² I owe a great deal of my insight to Donald Baillie, *The Theology of the Sacraments and Other Papers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957). Even though he has much to offer, still I do not always agree with his explanations. He, like so many of us, allows his traditions to color his interpretations of various texts to give credence to his presuppositions.

of the redemptive action of God in Christ.”³ A reflection upon the Lord’s Supper is contemplation upon the past. When we remember the Life, Death, and Burial of Jesus in the Supper, the past becomes reactive in our thinking about the Atonement made upon Calvary. As a Memorial, this contemplation calls to mind our deliverance from the world of darkness into the kingdom of God’s dear Son.

CONCLUSION

In this Supper, we are always conscious that we are the object of God’s redemptive action. **This biblical Memorial is a reminder of God’s divine action of eternal newness—a new creation in Christ Jesus** (2 Corinthians 5:17). **In this Supper**, we are put in mind that the past reaches out and joins the present. This Table is a means of teaching God’s community of believers about the Atonement and God’s forgiveness. **Just as in baptism, we participate in this great redemption.** Through this Feast, we are ever mindful that God’s grace is ever active. This Meal assures the permanent actuality of the redemptive act of God in the memory of His children. When we, as God’s children, remember the past, this remembrance makes the Atonement present and actual in our lives. In the Supper, the past and the present mingle. **This eating and drinking will always keep alive this redemptive action on God’s part in the lives of us all.** This Memorial Meal demonstrates God’s love and pardon. Remember, the purpose of the bread and wine is to take us back to the scene of redemption. **In this Meal, the whole of what Christianity is all about is expressed.**

In the Lord’s Supper, we witness the victory of Jesus over the powers of the enemies of Christ. **Why do we celebrate this Ceremony as a corporate body? In this celebration**, the church is reminded of its unity through the Atonement of Jesus upon Calvary. **In this Supper**, we behold the broken body of Christ on the Cross at Golgotha. This crucifixion is symbolized in the broken bread in the Communion. Paul writes in this fashion about the bread: “The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread,²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he **broke it** and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me’” (1 Corinthians 11:23-24). In the same manner, the outpoured wine is representative of His outpoured Blood upon the Cross. Matthew, too, writes about the symbolism in the wine:

Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you.”²⁸ This is my blood of the^b covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.²⁹ I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father’s kingdom.” (Matthew 26:27-29)

³ Oscar Cullmann and F. J. Leenhardt, *Essays on the Lord’s Supper* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1958), 66. **Oscar Cullman** (1902–1999) taught Greek, New Testament, and early Christianity at the University of Strasbourg, the University of Basel, and the Sorbonne in Paris. He is best known for his many books and prolific speaking about Christianity and history. Upon his death at 96, the World Council of Churches honored him for his extensive ecumenical work

^b Some manuscripts *the new*

Through the eating and drinking of the bread and wine, we are able to share in this Atonement of Christ upon the Tree. Here at Calvary, Jesus crushed the head of Satan. Emil Brunner captures this defeat of Satan's powers very graphically when he writes:

Then the death of Jesus Christ, from being a catastrophe, becomes the victory of God over you and your godlessness, then He draws you into His own eternal life, enabling you to share in His resurrection and making you by this means a new creation.⁴

As a “new creation,” we no longer live just for ourselves. When Christ enters the picture, individualism, as such, comes to an end. There is to be a transformation of the human personality. In Corinth, Christians were divided into various camps (1 Corinthians 1:10-17), but this mindset of individualism did not uphold the unity of the Sacrament:

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?¹⁷ Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. (10:16-17)

We are to work for unity within the body of Christ. Because there is “one loaf” (Christ), we are to maintain unity within the body of our Lord. Why? Believers still represent “one loaf”—“We, who are many, are one body.” Some saints in Corinth forgot about the true meaning of the Lord's Supper. Unfortunately, many Christians today have also forgotten the true meaning of this Meal. Thus, Paul sought to nip-in-the-bud the divisive spirit of individualism:

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.¹⁸ In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it.¹⁹ No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval.²⁰ When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat,²¹ for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk.²² Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not! (11:17-22)

The divisions placed in question the true meaning of the Lord's Supper. The congregation should be a fellowship of men and women in unity, but Paul presents a shameless picture of social cleavage, which is still rampant among many Christian fellowships. **The proclamation in the Lord's Supper is intended to awaken and strengthen faith in the Lord Jesus and to create unity among His followers.** In conclusion, we should never forget that the Last Supper is related to the redemptive meaning of His Death. **We cannot eat this bread and drink this cup without a consciousness of the condescending initiative of God who seeks to redeem sinners.** The bread and wine in the Last Supper derives its meaning from the redemptive action of God in Christ Jesus. What does this Memorial Meal mean to us?

Why did Jesus command the observation of this rite? He did not give His disciples any other similar instructions about divine worship. Why this? Is it not sufficient to preach and to

⁴ Emil Brunner, “The Meaning of the Last Supper,” in *The Great Invitation and Other Sermons* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 122.

believe His Gospel, the Gospel of His atoning death? Why this ceremony in our churches? For a long time I asked myself this question—as no doubt many of you have done—without finding the right answer, until the answer sprang to my mind about the dual meaning of the phrase “*Body of Christ*.”

How do we view the phrase “body of Christ”? On the one hand it refers to the body broken for us on the Cross at Golgotha: this death upon the Cross is symbolized or figuratively expressed in the broken bread, just as the outpoured wine represents the blood of Christ poured out for us on the Cross. That truth is the usual interpretation with which we are the most familiar.

It is true that the “bread” represents His body and “wine” represents His blood, yet, if we stop here, our concept of this Meal is incomplete. For the “Body of Christ,” in the New Testament, encompasses much more—the Church. The Church is the “Body of Christ” because Christians are incorporated into the eternal Christ by faith through the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). Thus our text says: **We** who are many, are *one body*. Within the Christian community, we witness a multiplicity of individuals, which Body represents a unity, that is to say, something whole and cohesive, kneaded together.⁵ It is not uncommon for Christians to cite and apply 1 Corinthians 11:29 incorrectly (I myself did for many years): “For if anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord [brothers and sisters in Christ] eats and drinks judgment on himself.” This Scripture is not focusing upon being worthy (sinless—no one is actually worship from a human perspective), but rather, the way we react toward other Christians who represent and are the Body of Christ. Shortly before Jesus’ crucifixion, He told His disciples: “This is my command: Love each other” (John 15:17).

⁵ Emil Brunner, “The Meaning of the Last Supper,” 122, 123.