

1. REMEMBRANCE

It is astonishing that God's redeemed people should need to be reminded of how they were saved. However, the Lord understands that we are weak and easily deceived, and so he has made provision for us to be reminded. That reminder is something we constantly need.

When we meet at the Lord's Table we often use the words of Jesus (Luke 22:19, and quoted by Paul in 1 Cor. 11:24-25) that we do this 'in remembrance' of him. From the time when Jesus first spoke those words, believers all over the world have met to remember his death in many different circumstances, both in times of freedom and of persecution.

A commanded remembrance

This remembrance is not something that people have invented for sentimental reasons. We have the authority and the command of Christ himself. The words recorded by Luke and Paul require us to maintain this service of remembrance permanently.

The regular practice of the church shows that the early Christians accepted this command. It is first seen in Acts 2:42 and appears again in verse 46. Later, we see that the early church regularly met for this remembrance on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). When he wrote to the church in Corinth, Paul referred to 'the cup of blessing' and 'the bread that we break' (1 Cor. 10:16); he knew that they were familiar with these things. In fact, the Greek tense of the word 'do' suggests repetition. It was a thing to be done again and again and again. This is also implied by the words in 1 Corinthians 11:23. In Acts 2 it seems that they observed the Lord's Table every day, [although not everyone agrees that Acts 2:46 refers to the Lord's Supper] while by Acts 20:7 it would appear that it had become a weekly practice. Paul had to write to the Corinthians to correct abuses of the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 11), but even this shows that they understood that it was commanded by the Lord and should be observed regularly.

Paul also writes in 1 Corinthians 11:23 that this is something that he has 'received' from the Lord. The word 'received' is one that would be used when accepting a task with obligations that were particularly binding and solemn. Paul tells us that he received a direct word from the Lord. The position of the word 'I' in the Greek gives it special emphasis. It is as if he had said 'I, even I', showing that he regarded it as a particularly significant task. Having received it from the 'Lord' he then 'delivers' it to others showing that it carried divine authority.

Both the words of institution and the practice of the early church therefore show us that the observance of the Lord's Supper is something commanded by the Lord himself. We therefore sometimes call it an 'ordinance' because it was ordained, or commanded, by the Lord for his church to observe. When we gather in this way, we do not do it because we think it is a good idea, but because it has been provided and commanded by Christ. Here is a warning to the Christian who neglects the Lord's Table! We need to be sure that there are good and right reasons if we are absent.

A visible remembrance

The Lord is so good in providing this remembrance in a form that matches our weakness. We need to *see* things. We want to *handle* things. We are just like Thomas who said that he would not believe unless he saw (John 20:25). This kind of remark is not necessarily an expression of terrible unbelief. It is rather that we have an instinctive desire for help through

our physical senses. The Lord knew all about that need, and so he provided a visible remembrance for us. It is a service designed to make an impression on our senses as well as our spiritual perception.

God has often provided external signs for the bodily senses of his people in order to point to spiritual realities. When God made his covenant with Noah, he told Noah that the rainbow was a sign between them that God would never again destroy the world by a flood (Gen. 9:17). Every time Noah saw a rainbow after that, it served as a visible reminder of what God had promised. Then there was the Passover meal which is closely and directly related to the Lord's Supper. The Passover was something to be observed regularly, and every time the people were to be told about the Lord's deliverance of his people from Egypt as a reminder of what God had done (Exod. 12). Again, the Feast of Tabernacles (when the people slept in leafy huts on the hillside) was a visible reminder of their life in tents and their journey through the wilderness (Lev. 23:33-43). The rod of Aaron and the pot of manna were also to be stored in the tabernacle to be a reminder of what the Lord had done (Heb. 9:4). A final example of an external sign is the heap of stones that Joshua set up in the Jordan as a reminder of the miraculous crossing (Josh. 4).

Because the Lord's Supper is a visible remembrance, we must take care to observe it carefully, using these external, visible and tangible signs. It is important for us also to preserve the simplicity of this service. In the course of history, Satan's first attack on the gospel came by corrupting the practices of baptism and the Lord's Supper, the two visible signs that Jesus gave to his church. These corruptions obscure or even eliminate the ways in which the signs are intended to remind us of the gospel. By adding to the original simplicity of the Lord's Supper it is almost turned into idolatrous worship by some groups, including the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore let us make sure that we keep the *simplicity* of the Lord's Table, by doing nothing *less* and nothing *more* than what Christ originally commanded.

The bread and wine used in this service are pictures to help us remember. When Jesus said, 'This *is* my body' he did not mean that they were identical but that one was a picture of the other. If I show you a photograph and say, 'This is my wife', you do not understand that I am married to the piece of paper. The writers of the Bible are using language in the same vivid way in which we use it. Here in the words of institution of the Lord's Supper there is clearly an example of metaphorical expression, a naturally vivid way of speaking, which means simply that this signifies (or this represents) 'my body'. It is evident that this is the correct understanding, because in 1 Corinthians 11:25 Paul tells us that Jesus said 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood'. Now, obviously, the *cup* was not the *covenant*. The cup was the symbol of the covenant. In the same way, the bread is the symbol of Jesus' body. Remember also that the Supper originated before Jesus was crucified and while he was still present in his body with the disciples. The bread and the wine are therefore *signs*, and in themselves they are nothing more. However, we need to be careful about this. Although the bread and the wine are themselves nothing more than signs, the service itself is much more than a picture. This leads us to a third point.

A strengthening remembrance

The Lord clearly intended that this act should be a means of grace to us. In other words, it is one of the ways in which the benefits of salvation come to us. It is true that the elements (the bread and wine) are no more than the signs of our redemption and therefore do not bring any automatic benefits. However, the ordinance itself is not a *mere* commemoration. The

meaning of the service is not complete simply by the act of taking bread and wine. The active faith of the believer in taking the elements is of immense significance. He is feeding spiritually upon the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Thus, while the elements are mere representations, the service is more than representation. Charles Spurgeon [famous Baptist preacher of the 19th Century; see Preface] urged his people in one of his sermons on the Lord's Supper to 'feast on him', and it is this spiritual reality which is expressed in the familiar Anglican formula, 'feed on him in your hearts by faith'. Again, to quote from Spurgeon's well-known sermon, 'We not only eat of his bread, but symbolically, we feast upon him ... I believe in the real presence of Christ: I do not believe in the carnal [physical, bodily] presence [as taught, for example, by the Roman Catholic Church]. I believe in the *real* presence to the believer: but that reality is none the less real because it is spiritual.' What a blessed thing it is for us to gather again and again around the Lord's Table with the Lord's people! Surely if you are a believer it has been a means of grace to you, a channel through which the Lord has shown you his glory, renewed your faith and sweetened your love! Now of course, that blessing is not in the elements themselves, but in the service. It is in your believing use of the elements. In this way, your heart and mind have been lifted up to him whom they represent. The confession of faith which was issued from Zurich under the influence of the Reformer Ulrich Zwingli [*The Sincere Confession of the Ministers of the Church of Zurich*, 1545] affirmed that 'Eating is believing and believing is eating.' Jesus' words recorded in John chapter 6:48-51 show that this is a correct interpretation. The Lord's Supper, therefore, is a strengthening remembrance and, so long as we understand what we mean by that, we may enjoy that truth to the full.

In summary, the Lord's Supper is *a special means of grace, but not a means of special grace*. In other words, there is nothing we receive in the Lord's Supper which we do not receive when we are praying at home, or listening to the preaching of God's Word. It is simply that the blessing is coming to us through another channel. There are many means of grace including the public preaching of the gospel, the prayer meeting, your own devotional time of private prayer, as well as the Lord's Table. And do not forget that active service for Christ is also a means of grace; the more you are pouring out, the more the Lord pours in.

A personal remembrance

There are many things that we can and should remember in this ordinance. Here are some suggestions.

Historically, the Lord's Supper has its origin in events that occurred on the night on which he was betrayed. 'The night'! What a night that was! The exact meaning of the Greek word underlying our English word 'betrayed' is a little uncertain. The word is *paradosis* and although it is often translated 'betrayed', it also means 'giving up'. It is an open question, and stimulating perhaps to your hearts as well as to your minds, to ask whether we are perhaps to understand the word *paradosis* in the sense of 'giving up'. There were two acts of 'giving up' that night. Judas gave him up: our Lord was betrayed. But, it was also the night in which he gave himself up. This word *paradosis* is found in Galatians 2:20, where we read, he 'loved me and gave himself [up] for me'. You can take the word in both ways and so receive the full significance. It was the night in which he was betrayed, but also the night in which the Lord gave himself up for us in such wonderful love.

This service is also a reminder of the historical basis of our faith. People today often think that faith is illogical, or that it is just a matter of personal opinion. We need to tell them, and

remind ourselves, about the facts. When God became man in the Person of Jesus Christ, it was a real event that culminated in his suffering under Pontius Pilate. The saving work of Christ is a thing that can be placed in a specific location, and pinpointed to a specific time. Let us remember that our confidence is not merely confidence in a book, even though the Bible is indeed valuable, authoritative, complete and final. Our confidence is in God himself and in the things that he did in Christ.

But the remembrance is far more than the historical one. This section is titled ‘a personal remembrance’ because our Lord said, ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’ He does not ask us to remember the date, or the place, but to remember him. Our Lord does not even say: ‘Do this in remembrance of my death’; although it is perfectly true that the service is full of the meaning of his death. In other words, he says, ‘Do this in memory of all that *I* am to you.’ Every aspect of our Christian doctrine is precious and important, but let us remember that it is not *this* that saves or *something else* that saves; it is *Christ* who saves. Our relation to God is a relation mediated through a living *Person*, all the time. Strictly speaking, when we preach the gospel we should not be inviting people to come to the cross, but to Christ. ‘Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and *I* will give you rest’ (Matt. 11:28). ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to *me* and drink’ (John 7:37). That is the true invitation; and so the Lord says, ‘Do this in remembrance of *me*.’

Notice too that the believers in the New Testament, after they had been observing the Lord’s Supper daily, settled down to observe it on the first day of the week, the resurrection day. They did not choose Friday, the death day. They chose the resurrection day, and by this they have shown us a great truth. The Lord’s Supper is a personal remembrance: it is the remembrance of our *living* Lord, whom we know. So, it is not a doctrine, not an instruction, not an event, but a living person who is commemorated. We remember not a person who is gone, but a person who *is present*. ‘For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them’ (Matt. 18:20).

‘Do this in remembrance of me.’ This statement helps to explain whether we are entitled to come to the Lord’s Table or not. If you know him, then of course you can come to the Lord’s Table, because you thus remember him.

A spiritual remembrance

The Lord’s Supper is not a mere ceremony. It demands the thoughts, the affection and the will. We are remembering our Saviour in our hearts, not merely observing an outward ordinance. It should therefore be a time when the heart rejoices and pledges itself afresh in committed devotion and love.

When we speak of ‘a spiritual remembrance’, this means first of all that it will be observed with reverence. In 1 Corinthians 11:27 we read, ‘Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.’ Many true-hearted believers have been disturbed by a misunderstanding of this. It has been understood to mean that if you feel ashamed and downcast because of your failure and sin then therefore you must not come. Oh, no! That is the right way to come! To take the Lord’s Supper unworthily is to take it without regard to its true *worth*. To do it unworthily is to come complacently, to come light-heartedly, to come without a care about your own sin and your shame. But to be burdened with your sin, even to be weighed down with a sense of

your guilt and utter unworthiness – that is truly to take the Lord’s Supper worthily. Only in this spirit is its purpose properly honoured.

Let me illustrate this by recounting a lovely incident in the life of Dr John Duncan of Edinburgh [1796-1870]. It happened when Dr Duncan was presiding at a communion service. In the front pew there was a woman weeping and obviously distressed about her own spiritual state. As the elder was proceeding along the line, handing the cup first to one and then to another, this weeping woman shook her head and bade the elder pass her by. At once perceiving the spiritual situation, the minister stepped down, gently took the cup from the elder and held it to the woman. He said: ‘Take it, woman, it’s for sinners.’ That is the way to take it; it is for sinners. That is the truly reverent and worthy attitude.

We should therefore approach the Lord’s Table with self-examination. In 1 Corinthians 11:28 Paul says, ‘Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.’ We must come to the Lord’s Table with searching of heart, not contemptuously or forgetting its deep solemnities. What a searching kind of remembrance this is!

There are some who shrink from the frequent observance of the Lord’s Supper. This is not from the fear that it might become unprofitable, but from the fear that it might prove to be too profitable! It is time when are reminded of our sinfulness and exposed to the light of God’s Word. Nevertheless, it *is* possible for us, by the very frequency of our observance of the Lord’s Supper, to lose its spiritual significance. Perhaps it is a peril that especially confronts those who have the responsibility to lead it. It is too easy to become so familiar with holy things that they pass us by. We know the words, we know the service. If, as ministers, we are responsible for conducting it, the thing may just be going through our head and by-passing our heart altogether. Let us pause, then, and allow the significance of this ordinance to confront us with its demands. We will truly remember him.

*Remember Thee, and all Thy pains,
And all Thy love to me;
Yes, while a breath, a pulse remains,
Will I remember Thee.*

(James Montgomery, 1771-1854)

A note on the terms used

Several terms have been used for this special remembrance. The greatest of these is the one that we have used more than once, namely, the **Lord’s Supper**. This is found in 1 Corinthians 11:20. I think there is no better title for this service than this simple and expressive term.

In 1 Corinthians 10:16, we come across the origin of the word **communion** [although modern translations may use a different word]. The Greek word is *koinonia*, which means ‘sharing together’. The ‘communion’ is joint-participation in the Lord Jesus. I am reminded by this very term that we are not in Christ by ourselves. We are together in Christ, and we share with one another in Christ. The word ‘communion’ in this context does not so much refer to what we might call our upward communion, our direct heart-to-heart participation in the Lord, but our togetherness in Christ as believers. We shall look into this in more detail when we consider the word ‘fellowship’ in Chapter 3. We may be familiar with the term ‘communion’, but perhaps we do not always remember its full significance.

Two other brief allusions to the title of this service are found in Acts 2:42, where it is called the **breaking of bread**, and in 1 Corinthians 10:21, where it is designated the **Lord's Table**. It does not matter which of these terms we use. They are all scriptural.

Later on in Christian history the service came to be called the **Eucharist**. There is nothing sinister about this particular word: it merely means giving thanks, and reflects the impression that the most characteristic thing about the institution of this ordinance was our Lord's action in giving thanks. And what should elate our hearts more at the Lord's Table than giving thanks? Perhaps we never observe the Lord's Supper so properly as when we lift our hearts in thanksgiving. So, although the word Eucharist has come to be monopolised by certain groups within the Christian church, do not forget its sweet simplicity: it is a thanksgiving.

A somewhat later term for the Lord's Supper is the word **sacrament**. The word comes from the Latin *sacramentum* which was used for an oath of allegiance, for example the one that a Roman soldier gave to the emperor. In its pure and original sense it is a perfectly innocent word. It does not mean anything mysterious. It can stand for any sacred and binding obligation into which a person enters. Unfortunately it is now best avoided, because of other connotations which have been added to it. It is, however, a reminder that in the Lord's Supper we are renewing our dedication to the Saviour.