

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNION

The concept and practice of “communion” is recognized throughout the world of “Christendom”. However, there is a great deal of variation in both the manner of observation and the understanding of what it is all about.

The “communion” referred to is what Paul called the “Lord’s Supper” (I Corinthians 11:20). The origin of this institution is recorded in Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, and Luke 22:17-20. The Apostle Paul provided more elaboration in I Corinthians 11:17-34.

PASSOVER....To understand the deeper meaning of the Lord’s Supper one must have some understanding of the Jewish Feast of Passover. The Passover observance (which continues to this day among many Jewish people) was an annual feast commemorating the occasion when the Israelites in Egyptian bondage escaped the killing of their firstborn when the death angel passed throughout the land (as recorded in Exodus 11-12). The Jewish Passover Feast is more than just a meal; it involves a set of ceremonial activities which call to mind various aspects of the deliverance provided by the Lord. The chief purpose of the observance was to perpetuate Jews’ appreciation of the deliverance provided by the Lord.

It will be recalled that a crucial aspect of the Passover deliverance was the presence of blood on the doorpost of the Israelites homes. The multiple sacrifices required by the Law of Moses involved much shedding of blood, cementing in the minds of the Jews a direct correlation between the shedding of blood and receiving God’s favor.

THE LAST SUPPER---SETTING..... It is significant to consider the mind-set of those present at the last supper. One can imagine himself being on death row, facing execution the next day. That was the situation with Jesus---except that he was not facing a relatively quick death by electrocution or hanging, or some other such execution. He knew that he was facing many hours of agonizing pain.

As for the apostles with Jesus, they knew that bad things were going to happen, but it is doubtful that any of them sensed the full extent of what their master would endure. Jesus had told them that he would die and that he would rise on the third day. But as we note what happened with them for the next several days we realize that they had a very poor understanding of what Jesus was telling them. As for the promise that Jesus would rise on the third day, the apostles either did not understand it---or they did not *believe* it---as evidenced by the fact that not a one of them showed up on the third day to greet the risen Lord. Not only that, but even when they heard of the resurrection some were completely surprised...or even skeptical.

DELAYED UNDERSTANDING.....In view of the apostles’ reactions we can probably safely assume that they did not have a very clear understanding of what Jesus meant when he broke the bread, told them to eat of it, and said, “Take and eat; this is my body”, or when he said of the cup, “Drink from it all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins....”.

Jesus had earlier made a promise to the apostles that after he returned to heaven he would send the Holy Spirit (“Comforter” or “Counselor”) who would both remind them and teach them (John 14:26). Sure enough, after the Holy Spirit was poured out on them on Pentecost (Acts 2) we see a totally transformed group of apostles as they preached and taught confidently and courageously, demonstrating a clear vision of what the Lord expected from them.

THE “COVENANT”.....Note that Jesus referred to the blood of the “covenant”. Again, it is doubtful that at the time the apostles really understood what Jesus referred to. “Covenant” means agreement. All realized that the first covenant, originally with Abraham, was culminated in the Law of Moses, under which Jesus lived and died. Jeremiah had prophesied that a new covenant would be established *unlike* the Law of Moses (see Jeremiah 31:31-34). We now realize that the new covenant was embraced in the saving gospel proclaimed by Jesus. We also now realize that the new covenant became effective through the shedding of Jesus’ blood.

THE PARALLELS.....The first covenant (Law of Moses) featured the sacrificial shedding of blood---*animal* blood. The second covenant (the gospel) was based on the shedding of blood---*Jesus’* blood. The Passover was designed to commemorate the deliverance from Egyptian bondage (opening the path to the Promised Land). The Lord’s Supper was designed to commemorate our deliverance from the curse of spiritual death (opening the path to our “promised land”, which is heaven). It was important to God to provide a reminder so that the Israelites never forgot their deliverance. It was equally important to God to provide us with a reminder so that we never fail to appreciate the suffering of our Lord, through which our deliverance was made possible.

TIMES, PLACES, AND MANNER....As mentioned at the outset, there is a great deal of variation in the ways in which various groups observe communion. A few facts should be pointed out: Jesus did *not* say when or how often the Lord’s Supper should be observed. The closest we can come to a time (scripturally) is I Corinthians 11:26 where Paul quotes Jesus as saying “*whenever*” you eat this bread and drink this cup....” No day is mentioned. No place is mentioned. No required frequency is mentioned. Obviously the scriptures provide considerable latitude in deciding these details.

There are only two clear scriptural references to actual observance of the Lord’s Supper. One is the occasion of its institution (at the Passover meal). The other reference is I Corinthians 11 where Paul rebuked the church in Corinth for grossly abusing what should have been an orderly spiritual atmosphere. Paul condemns observing the communion in an “unworthy manner”. He makes it clear that the mindset of the participants is vitally important, as each should “recognize the body of the Lord” as he eats and drinks; otherwise one eats and drinks “judgment on himself”.

This passage makes it clear that there is nothing magical about the physical observance itself. The value to the participant lies in the benefit to his soul as he honors the sacrificial love of the Savior.

It is interesting that both of the references to observance of the Lord's Supper were on the occasions of meals. Few (if any) groups today serve communion as part of a meal. Most fellowships serve only bread and wine (or grape juice) in their communion services. Again, the Lord's instructions provide a great deal of latitude in such decisions. Most understand that the basic goal is to remember the Lord's sacrifice for us. As long as this is achieved the Lord's purpose is accomplished. There is no wrong day or time. Some think weekly observance is best. Others feel that less frequent observance makes the event more special. Again, such decisions are matters of human judgment, not scriptural directive.

CONCLUSION.... Some have referred to the Lord's Supper as the "Christian Passover". There is some merit to that comparison. Many have sung the hymn, "When I See the Blood", a song that compares the Jewish deliverance in Egypt to our deliverance when the Father saves from eternal death those who have been "washed in the blood" of Jesus, the "Lamb of God". May we all approach the Lord's Supper with every bit of the seriousness with which Jewish people have approached the Passover.