

**"Being Church God's Way"**  
(Values that Determine Vision)

Study 8

**The First Last Supper**  
(First Value: Christocentricity)

**Passage:** Luke 22:7-31

**Verse** (to ponder and/or memorize)

"This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me . . . This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." (Luke 22:19-20)

**WHAT? (Summary of Sunday's sermon)**

**Importance**

As the only ordinance that the Lord instituted to be observed regularly (baptism is practiced once at the beginning of the Christian life), it is too important to be inserted into the service or tagged on at the end of the service.

If we observe it as we should it will help to keep us on track and to remain spiritually healthy.

In this study we are looking at the *origin* of the Lord's Supper. To do so we must have some knowledge of the Jewish Passover Feast. It was celebrated on a single night in conjunction with the Feast of Unleavened Bread that lasted seven days (Ex 12:1-51; Lev 23:4-8). Jesus would have celebrated the feast annually (Luke 2:41; John 2:13; 6:4; 11:55). But this particular celebration was especially significant. He expressly said to his disciples: "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you" (22:15).

**Timing is Everything**

Here we need to understand the "timing motif." Jesus was quite intentional in going up to Jerusalem (Mark 8:27-33; Luke 9:51; 18:31-34, cf. John 2:4; 7:6, 30; 12:23, 27, 28; 13:1; 17:1). He knew that this was to be his last Passover and that at

this feast he would be betrayed, rejected and crucified. That's why the message he sent to the person who made a large upper room available to him and his disciples stressed that it was the *kairos* (the appointed time): "My *appointed time* is near; I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house" (Matthew 26:18).

### **The Cryptic Run-up to the Meal**

Read 22:7-13. Many have wondered why Jesus sent Peter and John on what appears to be a "secretive" mission. Usually men did not carry jars of water. Women carried water in jars and men in skins. So they would be able to identify this particular man and follow him. It would be clear to them where they had to go and to whom they had to speak, but the other disciples had no idea where they would celebrate the Passover. This, in all probability, was because Judas was with them and had already agreed to betray Jesus. There could hardly have been a better time for the guards to arrest him than when the nation was celebrating the Passover in their homes. Jesus *did* make a secretive arrest possible by lingering in the Garden of Gethsemane, but he did not want the Supper interrupted. Judas, along with the other disciples, would only discover where the meal was being held when they arrived at the venue.

### **The Essentials of the Passover Meal**

I won't go into *too* much detail here, but some understanding of the Passover meal is necessary to make sense of Luke's account. When we look at the passage, I shall refer, by number, to the relevant aspects of the meal. The items necessary for the meal and the sequence followed at the meal were specified.

1. A lamb was offered in the forecourt of the temple on the afternoon before the Passover meal and then roasted for the meal itself.
2. Upon arrival, the participants in the meal took their place, reclining around a low table arranged roughly in the shape of a horseshoe (Leonardo Da Vinci's painting does not give us an accurate portrayal). The head of the household (or person presiding) commenced with a prayer of thanksgiving (Blessed are you, LORD our God, king of the universe . . .")
3. They then shared in the first of four cups of (usually diluted) wine, after which they washed their hands.
4. The head of the household took some of the bitter herbs, dipped them in salt water, ate some of them, and gave the rest to the others.

5. The dishes were removed.
6. The youngest son then asked a series of questions: "Why is this night distinguished from all other nights? For on all other nights we eat leavened or unleavened bread, but on this night only unleavened bread? On all other nights we eat all kind of herbs, but on this night only bitter herbs? On all other nights we eat meat roasted, stewed or boiled, but on this night only roasted? On all other nights we dip (the herbs) only once, but on this night twice?"

The head of the household replied, relating the national history commencing with Abraham's father, Terah, and telling of the deliverance from Egypt and the giving of the law. The more fully he explained it, the better.

7. The dishes were then brought back. The head of the household then took up, in succession, the dishes containing the Passover lamb, the bitter herbs and the unleavened bread and explained the significance of each. He did this (according to Rabbi Gamaliel) as if he, himself, had come up out of Egypt.
8. They then sang the first part of the Hallel (Psalm 113 and 114).
9. After this they drank the second cup. Again they washed their hands.
10. The head of the household then broke one of the two 'loaves' of unleavened bread.
11. Pieces of the broken loaf with bitter herbs between them were then dipped into the *Charoseth* (a dish containing a mixture of dates, raisins and vinegar) and distributed.
12. The lamb was then eaten.
13. After this they drank from a third cup, the "cup of blessing." At this time the door was opened to (symbolically) admit Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah, and passages were read that foretold the destruction of the heathen nations.
14. Later, an "after-dish" of unleavened bread was allowed, but at this time nothing was to be eaten after the lamb.

15. The service concluded with the fourth cup, after which they sang the second portion of the Hallel (Ps 115-118).

### **The Passage**

Read 22:17-20.

From verse 24-30, we read about a dispute that took place among the disciples. This may well have been about the seating arrangements at the Passover meal. It is hardly likely that any one of them would have been as crass as to say, "I am greater (or more important) than you." But they'd been at it before! (Mark 9:33-37; 10:35-45) It certainly seems as though the squabble took place soon after their arrival. So, let's look at the passage in relation to the Passover meal.

*<sup>14</sup> When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. <sup>15</sup> And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. <sup>16</sup> For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."*

The Lord's eager desire is partly because this is his last meal with them before his passion (as stated here). When we read John 13-17, we realize that he has some very important things to say to them around the table.

*<sup>17</sup> After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. <sup>18</sup> For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."*

This is the first cup of the Passover meal (#3).

They would have washed their hands after the second cup (#9). Assuming that the disciples had engaged in their dispute soon after their arrival, it is most probable that it was at this point that Jesus washed their feet (John 13:1-17). It is highly unlikely that they would have had this dispute about greatness *after* the foot-washing and his words to them about humbling themselves.

*<sup>19</sup> And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."*

This would have followed the second cup and the foot-washing (#10). We cannot be sure at what point Jesus words recorded in John 14-16 were spoken (perhaps at

the point where the youngest son usually asked his questions, #6). We are told that Jesus *first* gave thanks and then broke the bread (cf. 1 Cor 11:23-24).<sup>1</sup>

John tells us that he asked Jesus which of them was to betray him and that Jesus replied (so that only John could hear) that it was "the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish" (John 13:22-30). The dish referred to was the Charoseth (#11).

<sup>20</sup> *In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.*

This was the third cup (#13), "the cup of blessing" (it is called this in Jewish writings and by Paul in 1 Cor 10:16). Interestingly, in the place of the reading of passages that foretell the destruction of the heathen, the Lord speaks of the new covenant in my blood. Under the new covenant salvation is extended to the nations. "Jesus Christ, the righteous one. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:1-2).

### **The Practice of the Early Church**

From the outset, the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper. The "breaking of bread," referred to in Acts 2:42, 46 and 20:7, was a fellowship meal that included the celebration of the Lord's Supper. At first, this was celebrated in the evening as part of a shared meal that was called the Agapé or "love feast." Later the celebration of the Lord's Supper immediately preceded the Agapé. In the next stage, the Lord's Supper was celebrated in the morning and the Agapé in the evening. By the fourth century the Agapé was taken out of the churches and held in private homes. Eventually, it disappeared.<sup>2</sup>

### **Value**

Clearly Jesus' disciples understood that he intended them to celebrate the Lord's Supper on a regular basis. Let's, at this stage, consider the practical reasons for this instruction.

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<sup>1</sup> There is scope for a difference of opinion here. The rabbinical authorities decreed that the prayer of thanksgiving was to come *after*, not before, the breaking of the bread. This has inclined some commentators to say that the bread broken was after the meal, since Jesus had already given thanks. But at this time no bread was eaten after the lamb. It is safer to say that Jesus intentionally gave thanks before he broke the bread. He was free to do so if he wished and he may have wanted to draw attention to the important new element. After all, he was about to say, "This is *my* body." Luke tells us that he took the cup *after* supper. He does not say this about the bread.

<sup>2</sup> Otto W. Heick, *A History of Christian Thought, Vol. 1* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 219.

### *Why?*

- It focuses our attention where it ought to be. We Christians are notorious for majoring on minors. We easily become fascinated by what is actually not all that important in the total scheme of things. The regular, appropriate celebration of the Lord's Supper brings us back to the cardinal truth of our faith: "Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures . . ." (1 Cor 15:3).
- This helps to prevent us from "backsliding." We backslide when we slip backwards from where we were in our spiritual lives. If we take regular account of what the Lord has done for us and respond appropriately to his love and grace, we are unlikely to backslide.
- It underlines the importance of maintaining right relationships with our fellow-Christians. Nothing can possibly be more important than this. *It is Christianity 101* (1 Cor 1:10; 10:16-17; 11:17-22; 1 John 2:9-11; 4:19-21). How ironic that the disciples were fighting about who was the greatest at the Last Supper (Luke 22:24-30). If we "recognize the body of Christ" when we participate (1 Cor 11:29), we are preserved from the pettiness of pride and similar disputes.

### *How?*

- The accent is on attitude, not on incidental details. Inevitably "forms" and preferences emerge in the way we celebrate communion. Some prefer a single cup, others individual glasses; some use fermented wine, others grape juice; some insist on matzos, others small pieces of bread; some churches have the people come forward; other serve them in the pews; some want silence, others prefer joyful singing. Enough! The golden rule here is that we should do whatever it takes to make the experience meaningful.
- This is a time of reflection and reverence, of gratitude and self-examination, of seriousness and joy, of reconciliation and recommitment. It is a time for us to reaffirm our allegiance to the one who gave everything for us, to celebrate our salvation and to affirm that we who are committed to the Lord are also committed to one another in love.

One thing is for sure: The Lord's Supper should never be simply inserted into a worship service or tagged on to it.

## SO WHAT?

1. It is not crucial for us to understand all the details of the Passover Feast in order to appreciate the essentials of the Lord's Supper. But does a basic knowledge of the sequence help you to understand Luke's description?
2. Consider the significance of the connection between the Passover and the Lord's suffering for us (Ex. 12: 5, 7, 46; Num. 9:12; John 19:36; 1 Pet 1:19).
3. What, in your view, are the most important spiritual values of an *appropriate* observance of the Lord's Supper?

## NOW WHAT?

1. What are you going to do to make the celebration of the Lord's Supper a more meaningful experience *for yourself*?
2. What are you going to do to make the celebration of the Lord's Supper a more meaningful experience *for your fellow-believers*?
3. Why don't we bring back the Agapé?