

# The Covenant Meal

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*Meaningful Holy Communion*

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To Peter:  
‘A wise son brings joy to his father’  
(Proverbs 10:1)

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*Note on terminology*

Christians use a variety of terms to describe the rite that is the subject of this book: Communion; Holy Communion; the Breaking of Bread; the Eucharist; the Mass; the Lord’s Supper; the Lord’s Table. As the default term in these pages I have chosen ‘the Lord’s Supper’, the term used by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:20.

## Chapter 1

# Rite of confusion

In a Spanish cathedral I once sat in on a Roman Catholic Mass. Incense filled the air, adding to the atmosphere of solemnity and mystery created by the lavish decorations behind the altar, the candles, the embroidered vestments of the priest, the throb of the mighty organ that accompanied the chants, and the pillars soaring into the gloom of the vaulted roof.

The sense of awe reached its peak as the priest pronounced the words of consecration, ‘This is my body’, and held aloft the host for worship.

\*

By contrast, as a young man I often attended Holy Communion at a ‘low’ Anglican church. The form was simple and the people’s sincerity beyond doubt, even if the service did progress ‘by the book’, which wasn’t my own tradition. The invitation to ‘feed on Christ in your heart by faith’ found a ready response in my spirit, and I always went away blessed.

\*

More often, though, I ‘remembered the Lord’ among the Open Brethren. From childhood I became used to the Sunday morning ‘Breaking of Bread’, where hymns from *The Believers’ Hymn Book* focused our attention on the sufferings of Christ on our behalf. Preaching or testimony before the taking of the

bread and wine would have been unthinkable, a distraction from our primary interest—the cross of our Lord.

As I chewed on the bread, which passed from hand to hand in absolute silence, I would screw up my eyes in an effort to ‘see’ Jesus hanging on the cross for me. I pictured, as I had been taught to do, the crown of thorns, the nails, the wounds, the blood.

\*

Again, I recall a student conversation in a university hall of residence where some members of the Christian Union were chatting.

‘We couldn’t take communion this morning,’ complained one student. ‘The vicar was preaching somewhere else and the curate, who was supposed to officiate, didn’t turn up. So we had to do without.’

‘Why couldn’t someone else do it?’ queried one of the others, a Pentecostal.

‘Because there was no other ordained person present.’

‘What’s that got to do with it?’

‘Everything, of course! Only an ordained person can officiate at Holy Communion. I thought everybody knew that.’

‘Show me chapter and verse for it, then.’

‘Well, I don’t know about that, but...’

And so the exchange continued, long into the evening, generating more heat than light.

## Cassava and cold tea

In central Africa I joined a group of worshippers in partaking of cassava mush and cold tea laced with vinegar, obeying

Christ's command, 'Do this in remembrance of me,' in a mud hut in the middle of the bush, miles from anywhere.

\*

Back in England, I once shared bread and wine informally with a boisterous bunch of God's people in someone's lounge, with much back-slapping, greeting of each other, prayer and laughter. One cheerful soul at my elbow shouted across the room, 'Hey, Pete, throw us a bit of bread over, will you?'

Pete obliged. A piece of bread torn from a loaf on the table sailed over the heads of the crowd to a neat catch and consumption by two young men whose sincerity and love for the Lord were beyond question. A far cry from the solemn ritual of the cathedral!

\*

I have attended meetings of the Salvation Army and the Quakers who, as a matter of policy, never take communion at all.

Elsewhere, I have eaten wafers both round and square, bread leavened and unleavened, pulled apart by hand or neatly cubed beforehand, bread brown and white, sliced and unsliced, fresh and stale. I have drunk wine from silver chalices, earthenware mugs, individual thimble-sized glasses and plain glass tumblers, containing wine both fermented and unfermented.

At one chapel the steward discovered just before the Communion Service that the wine had run out. No local shops being open, he rushed across the road to the house of one of the members, who provided half a jar of raspberry jam. Mixed with water and stirred vigorously, it passed for wine, even if the seeds did get stuck in our teeth.

Some celebrate the Lord's Supper daily. Others maintain there is a biblical case for weekly celebration—and that it must be on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day. Oddly, they would usually insist that the 'supper' be eaten in the morning. Others again make it a monthly ritual tagged on to the end of a normal Sunday service, or even an annual one, celebrated preferably at Eastertide.

The nature of the act is as disputed as its frequency. Those who regard it as a mere memorial of Christ's death express horror at the Roman Catholic and 'high church' conviction that it repeats the sacrifice of Christ, whose body and blood are offered again to God upon the altar by a priest. And vice versa. A range of intermediate views lie between the two.

### Linked issues

The doctrine of the Lord's Supper does not stand in isolation. It has a way of touching a whole range of Christian attitudes. In recent years, for example, it has been at the centre of the debate on the ordination of women. With regard to that debate, the Bishop of Salisbury shrewdly observed, 'Some of the important issues are not specifically about the role of women at all, but about the eucharist.'<sup>1</sup>

The main argument here revolves around the 'iconic' view of the ministry. On this view, the person presiding at communion is seen as an 'icon' (image) of Christ as he presided at the Last Supper. He should, therefore, be an image of Christ in his maleness. A woman, it is argued, cannot truly represent the *man* Christ Jesus.

This approach makes some major assumptions, notably that the clergy/laity distinction is a valid one, the clergy being defined as a body of men fitted by ordination to perform

certain holy functions forbidden to the laity. It then assumes that the presiding person at the Eucharist must be a member of this male clergy. It assumes also that he is a priest representing Christ.

Vast numbers of Christians, however, would question all these assumptions, arguing for the priesthood of all believers and the right of *any* sincere Christian to break the bread and dispense the wine. To them, the arguments about women's ministry revolve around different issues altogether.

### Legitimate questions

In the last third of the twentieth century the Charismatic Renewal broke down some inter-denominational barriers, with certain positive effects. One of these was to foster a new awareness of the variety in Christian practice, including the practice of Communion. As a result fewer of God's people today are willing to accept without question the traditional practices of their own denominations. Increasingly they are asking, 'Why...?'

How, may I ask, do *you* view the Lord's Supper? Do you understand what you are doing as you partake of it? What thoughts run through your mind as you eat and drink?

How often do you celebrate it? Annually? Monthly? Weekly? Daily? Periodically? What governs your choice?

Have you ever questioned your denomination's practice? Do you regard the Lord's Supper as a duty or a pleasure? What, if anything, do you expect to gain from participating?

Seeking answers to such questions forces us to face another, namely, what is our authority in spiritual things? I must put my cards on the table here and state my conviction

that the only legitimate authority is the Bible. Traditions, even allegedly Spirit-led ones, must be judged by Scripture if chaos is to be avoided. Church history, alas, offers ample evidence of such chaos. It is to the touchstone of Scripture, therefore, that in these pages I bring the confused issue of the Lord's Supper.

It is my conviction also that, as God's purpose for human history unfolds, the Holy Spirit is actively overseeing Christ's church at large to bring it to a place of substantial unity in readiness for Christ's return. He keeps drawing to the attention of God's people certain truths and emphases which, though present in Scripture from the beginning, have long been ignored or overlooked. Regarding the Lord's Supper, the title of this book—*The Covenant Meal*—points to the covenantal emphasis that I believe the Spirit of God to be restoring to the church today.

The laying aside of eucharistic preconceptions is no easy task. Some would say it is impossible. But let's at least attempt it as we look into Scripture for light on this vital topic. And let our searching be done, not out of academic interest, but with a mind to be 'doers of the word'. Only doers are blessed.

*Chapter 1 NOTES*

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in C. Howard, *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood*, CIO Publishing, 1984, p57

## Chapter 2

# Roots in the Passover

The *Lord's* Supper began with the *Last* Supper. And the Last Supper was a Passover meal.

We call it the Last Supper, of course, because it was the final meal shared by Jesus and his inner circle of followers before his crucifixion. The Bible records the event in Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22 and 1 Corinthians 11. It took place, in fact, on the very night of his arrest, when he made his way to an upper room 'to eat the Passover' with his disciples.<sup>1</sup>

And what exactly was the Passover? Without an understanding of this we cannot appreciate what it means to take the bread and wine of Communion. So let's remind ourselves of this important Old Testament event.

Of all the great feasts of Israel, the Passover was the greatest—and the oldest. It was the annual celebration of that turning point in Israel's history when, after four centuries under the slave-master's whip in Egypt, God miraculously brought the people out and pointed them towards the Promised Land where they were to live as a free nation under his rule. It was a festival of deliverance from slavery and of a new beginning. And for us Christians it is a vivid picture of our own deliverance from a spiritual Egypt of slavery to sin and of our new beginning in Christ.

## The great deliverance

Exodus 12 records the story. Moses, you will recall, had graduated from God's school in the desert of Midian after his forty-year course. He emerged with no degrees or diplomas but with a much-mellowed character. The hotheaded Prince of Egypt had become a man of God and now, equipped with miraculous powers and God's own words, he arrived in Egypt with a tall order for a proud Pharaoh: "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: "Let my people go.""

Far from rushing to obey, Pharaoh dug in his heels—just as Satan does today in his reluctance to see his slaves released into the hands of Christ the Redeemer. At Moses' word, therefore, God brought a succession of nine awful plagues upon the Egyptians, each one designed to show the superiority of the living God of Israel over the pagan deities of Egypt.<sup>2</sup>

It was a fearful time. The rivers turned to blood. Frogs, gnats and flies hopped and buzzed till the Egyptians were driven mad. The livestock succumbed to a fatal disease, then the few animals that remained—and the people themselves—broke out in boils. In the wake of freak hailstorms that crushed the standing crops came swarms of locusts to strip the country of its greenery. Finally, God blotted out the sun to plunge Egypt into a three-day spell of near-tangible darkness.

Still Pharaoh remained unyielding. But even the proudest enemy of God has his breaking point, and Pharaoh's came with the tenth plague: the death of the firstborn of every Egyptian family, 'from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the slave girl, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well'.

## Preparations

In readiness for the great packing of bags and moving out that this plague would prompt, the Israelites were to make certain preparations. First, each family was instructed to take a year-old male lamb and observe it for a time to check that it was free from defect—a wonderful picture of the sinless life of our Lord Jesus, God's perfect Lamb.

Then they were to slaughter the animal and paint some of its blood onto the sides and tops of the door-frames of their houses. Genuine Christians get excited as they read this. What a powerful picture it presents of the blood of Christ shed on the cross and applied to their own lives and that of their fellow-believers!

God commanded a *meal*, too. What a marvellously practical God he is: he didn't want them trekking into the unknown on an empty stomach. Within their blood-marked houses they were to dine on roast lamb, along with bitter herbs and unleavened bread (that is, bread made without yeast). They were to feast on the very lamb whose shed blood was the price of their deliverance—just as we, who are the beneficiaries of Christ's shed blood, now feed on him by faith. The one Lamb provides both salvation and sustenance.

This Passover meal was to be no leisurely affair. They were to risk indigestion by eating it in haste, with staff in hand, cloaks tucked into belts and sandals on, ready for the 'off' which was to sound as soon as the dire truth of the death of the firstborn dawned upon the plague-weary Egyptians.

'On that night,' promised the Lord, 'I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn—both men and animals—and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt;

I am the Lord. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will *pass over* you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.'

And that's exactly how it happened. 'At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in Egypt...and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead.'

Pharaoh at last changed his tune, urging the Israelites to hurry and get out of the country, adding a pathetic 'And also bless me.' Thus began one of the greatest mass migrations in human history. It was The Exodus, the great moving-out.

## Feast of remembrance

Such a great event merited remembrance. The Israelites' future as a free nation, God insisted, must always be remembered as hinging upon this mighty deliverance.

To fix it in their memory, God instituted the Passover festival. It was to be Israel's annual celebration of his saving power and would be dominated by a meal proclaiming his faithfulness as a covenant-keeping God. Held in the month of Nisan (March-April), the celebration of the festival, like the original Passover, was to revolve round the eating of roast lamb with bitter herbs and unleavened bread.

Each item was calculated to trigger memories. The lamb was of double significance. It illustrated, first of all, the principle of *substitution*: a lamb had died instead of the Israelite firstborn—just as a ram had earlier gone to the altar in place of the patriarch Isaac, and just as Jesus, God's ultimate Lamb, would die, 'the righteous for the unrighteous' to bring us to God.<sup>3</sup>

The lamb was also a token of God's *concern for their physical welfare*—that they should not be hungry as they began their journey through the desert. It is good to remember that he is still concerned for the physical (as well as for the spiritual, mental and emotional) welfare of his people. God doesn't carve us up into spirit, soul and body, emphasising the first two at the expense of the third; he cares for us *as whole people*. And, as we shall see, our eating of the Lord's Supper, the Christian equivalent of the Jewish Passover, has implications of a highly physical nature.

The bitter herbs recalled the *bunches of hyssop* the Israelites had used as brushes for painting that vital blood on their door-posts. And even more telling, perhaps: the face-creasing bitterness they experienced as the herbs touched their taste-buds acted as a keen reminder of the *bitterness of the long slavery* from which the shed blood had rescued them.

The unleavened bread brought to mind the *haste* with which they had left Egypt, haste which had prevented their waiting for yeasted bread to rise before baking and eating it. Urged out of the land by Pharaoh, 'the people took their dough before the yeast was added, and carried it on their shoulders in kneading troughs wrapped in clothing'.

But it meant more than that. In Hebrew thinking, yeast or leaven soon became a common symbol of *corruption*. In this respect, the eating of unleavened bread at the Passover feast would remind them that, by the events of the original Passover, they had not only been separated *from* the evils of Egypt but also separated *to* a holy God. Leaving sin behind, they were to be holy, just as God himself was holy. And the same applies to us.<sup>4</sup>

The celebratory eating of bread without yeast went on, in

fact, for a whole week each year, immediately following the Festival of the Passover. This was the Festival of Unleavened Bread, a picture of the holiness of life to which we are called today as God's New Testament people. As Paul was to point out many centuries later, we Christians are to 'keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth.'<sup>5</sup>

The Passover, God said, was to be 'a lasting ordinance', one to endure throughout future generations. True to his command, generation after generation of Jews kept the feast until, some thirteen centuries after its institution, we find Jesus and his disciples celebrating the Passover in that upper room, at the Last Supper.

But change was imminent. On God's calendar, the ministry of Jesus marked the ending of one era and the beginning of a new one. Events were about to take place at Calvary and the garden tomb that would completely overshadow even the great exodus from Egypt. Because those events would mark a radical change in God's dealings with his people, they would also require a radical change in the feast his people observed.

During the Last Supper, therefore, Jesus made a startling move: he broke into the long-established Passover routines and gave them a completely new direction. He ordered the Festival of the Passover off stage to make room for—the Lord's Supper.

## A better feast

Jews still keep the Passover today, and to be present at its celebration can be a deeply moving experience. Family life,

faith and a sense of racial identity receive an annual underlining that can only be beneficial.

But how sad that, in failing to recognise Jesus as their Messiah, the Jews at large also fail to see God's far greater provision for family life, for faith and for a national identity that transcends Jewishness. This is the new international, non-racial 'holy nation'<sup>6</sup> in which barriers of race, colour, pedigree and social class come tumbling down and where 'Christ is all, and is in all'<sup>7</sup>—the church.

What a joy and privilege to belong to this new nation! We look back to a more oppressive slavery than that of Egypt, from which we have been delivered by the death of a better lamb—the spotless Lamb of God. Our new nationhood—and hence our new sense of security and identity—is rooted in God himself and, like him, is eternal, good for both this life and the one to come.

In the meantime we celebrate a feast, a festival of deliverance and rejoicing called the Lord's Supper. While, as we have seen, it has its roots in the Passover, it surpasses the Jewish feast in every way.

Let's now consider how Jesus brought it into being.

#### *Chapter 2 NOTES*

<sup>1</sup> Luke 22:8

<sup>2</sup> See Exodus chapters 7-11

<sup>3</sup> 1 Peter 3:18

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 11:44-45; 1 Peter 1:15-16

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:8

<sup>6</sup> 1 Peter 2:9

## Heightened reality

The rejoicing of the last chapter can take a knock when we read Paul's puzzling and alarming statements about judgment at the Lord's Supper.<sup>1</sup>

Weakness, sickness and death, it seems, had fallen upon some of the Corinthian Christians because of their unworthy participation in the Supper. We know that a holy God must punish sin, but why, we naturally wonder, should they be judged by God for their behaviour at the covenant meal in particular rather than for their behaviour in general?

To answer that question we must refresh our minds about the meaning of meals. A meal, we observed earlier, is a time for *togetherness*. This aspect is highlighted by the New Testament's use, in describing the Lord's Supper, of the Greek word *deipnon*. The *deipnon* was the main meal of the day in Bible times, taken in the evening when the members of a family came together to eat after their separate daytime pursuits.

A meal is also *an occasion*, a special time for focusing on our friendship with family, friends and guests over food and drink.

We noticed, too, how in Bible times a meal was often more than that. It had religious overtones. In many contexts it became *a sacred act uniting the eaters*.

Recalling the criticism levelled by the Pharisees against

Jesus for his eating with tax collectors and sinners, we noticed that the meal table was a *place of association*. By eating with a certain person you indicated your acceptance of them and your loyalty to them. 'The table at which you eat is the loyalty to which you are pledged.'<sup>2</sup>

Then we considered, in particular, covenant meals, which placed obligations upon the participants in terms of their *relationship with each other*. To repeat the meal, the way Jews kept the Passover meal each year, was to renew their covenant commitments, first to the Lord and then to one another.

Barclay illustrates all these implications in his explanation of David's famous sentence, 'You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies':<sup>3</sup>

The picture is that of a man fleeing across the desert with his enemies hot on his heels. He arrives at an encampment where the family are at a meal. He stands before the open tent in hesitation and in mute appeal. If the man in the tent stretches out his hand and offers him food, bread and salt, he is safe, for he will be accepted into the encampment and, if need be, defended to the last. But if the man in the tent turns away and refuses, the fugitive is left to face his enemies alone. The giving and the sharing of the meal is the mark of committed friendship. Those who sit at a meal are committed to each other, and committed to their host, and their host is committed to them.'<sup>24</sup>

At the Lord's Supper, Jesus himself is the host. He saw us as spiritual fugitives and stretched out his hand in welcome. Now we find ourselves seated at his table with other ex-fugitives, and in sharing the meal with them we express our commitment not only to our host, Jesus, but to our fellow-eaters. We are bound by covenant, vertically and horizontally.

## A sharpening of focus

The key to understanding why God's judgment is drawn towards the Lord's Supper as lightning is drawn towards a tower lies in these observations about meals.

The point is that, because of everything that eating together signifies, the everyday realities of the new covenant are *heightened when we share the covenant meal*. They are brought into sharper focus. Their deep significance is highlighted. The rewards of covenant faithfulness become more apparent, and the penalties of neglect strike home with greater force.

By way of illustration, imagine a woman who is becoming frustrated with her husband. In a moment of deep sadness and anger she shouts over her shoulder, 'I don't love you any more!' The man is devastated. She can't possibly mean it, can she? Surely it was just a statement thrown out in the heat of the moment as she stalked out of the door. Or was it?

He must know. So he follows her through to the other room, turns her round to face him and says, 'Can you look me in the eye and say that again?'

As she meets his gaze and the windows of their souls are opened to one another, she finds the words sticking in her throat. In the heightened awareness of the eyeball-to-eyeball situation, words that before slipped out easily are now subjected to a more stringent test of reality.

Take another case. Graham has always prided himself on being straightforward and truthful. He would be hard-pressed to tell a lie. Today he is in court, a witness in an important case. As he mounts the witness box he takes the oath, promising before God to tell 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth'.

Suddenly, he has a heightened awareness of the importance of telling the truth. Truthfulness has always been Graham's practice, but in this special situation, it assumes a vivid new importance. Life imposes its own penalties when we tell lies, but the penalties for perjury—for lying under oath—are altogether more serious.

This is exactly the kind of heightened spiritual reality that marks our participation in the covenant meal of the Lord's Supper. Hopefully, we live as a covenant community all the time, but at the Supper we are eyeball-to-eyeball, so to speak, telling each other in the meal, 'I love you.' We are 'under oath' before God and each other.

Numbers 5 provides a biblical illustration. A woman suspected of adultery would be taken to the priest and invited 'under oath' (v19) to drink the 'water of jealousy', a beverage which, under God, would reveal her true moral position. If she was innocent it would do her no harm. In fact, it would do her good, because she would be justified before her husband and fellow-citizens and be able to live her life with a new dignity. But if she was guilty, the drinking of the 'water that brings a curse' would cause her 'thigh to waste away' and her 'abdomen to swell' (v21-22). She would suffer physically (by being unable to bear children) and be branded an adulteress.

The drinking of water is in itself an everyday occurrence. The water was ordinary, as indeed are the bread and wine of communion, but this was no ordinary drinking—it had spiritual significance. In the providence of God, it was calculated to find her out, either for good or for ill.

## The case of Judas

In the New Testament, Judas is a case in point. A meal found him out, too.

John records that when the Passover meal was being served, ‘the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus’.<sup>5</sup> Judas sat down to chew over the commitment-food with his teeth and betrayal with his mind. What a dangerous discrepancy! His willingness to share in the meal with Jesus proclaimed, ‘I’m with you and for you,’ while in his heart he was saying, ‘I’m against you.’

During the meal, Jesus made it known that one of them would betray him, the one to whom he would give the sop, or piece of dipped bread. ‘Then,’ John continues, ‘dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him’.<sup>6</sup>

Notice how the sharing of the meal, especially his acceptance from Jesus of the bread, crystallised the state of Judas’s heart. Satan, who before had been content to prompt, now took over. What had begun in Judas’s heart as a mere inclination towards betrayal now became a fixation. It was the meal that did it.

The covenant meal is a dangerous place for hypocrites. Though his heart had harboured thoughts of betrayal, Judas had gone through all the normal motions of friendship, secure (or so he had thought) in the knowledge that no-one was aware of his evil intentions. So when all the others had said, ‘Surely not I, Lord?’, he had had the audacity to say the same.<sup>7</sup>

He was still playing the same game at Jesus’ arrest, when he greeted him in the customary way with the word ‘Rabbi!’ and a kiss. But it was too late. The meal had already found

him out.

This is the tragedy of Judas, and it could be the tragedy today of those who eat the Lord's Supper with betrayal, or some other unworthy attitude, in their hearts. The meal signifies togetherness, commitment, harmony and mutual love. To eat that meal with contrary heart-attitudes of rebellion, self-seeking, disharmony or betrayal is to court disaster. Those who shout 'Yes' when they really mean 'No' are guilty of spiritual perjury and are ripe for judgment.

It is this fearful incompatibility—eating the covenant meal with a heart full of anti-covenant hatred—that lends force to the statements of Jesus, 'The one who has *dipped his hand into the bowl with me* will betray me'<sup>8</sup> and, 'One of you will betray me—one who is eating with me'.<sup>9</sup> He quotes the Psalmist: 'He who *shares my bread* has lifted up his heel against me'.<sup>10</sup>

And again: 'It is *one of the Twelve*'<sup>11</sup>—one of that committed inner circle who shared meals together. Mark records Jesus as saying, 'Here comes my betrayer!' adding, 'Just as he was speaking, Judas, *one of the Twelve*, appeared'.<sup>12</sup> It is an awful thing to be reckoned as part of the committed group and go through the motions of commitment when the heart is set on betrayal.

More than any other facet of Christian fellowship in general, and of the Lord's Supper in particular, it is this one which today's covenant community—the church of Christ—desperately needs to understand.

## A two-edged sword

The sobering fact is that, because God himself has built into the Lord's Supper this principle of heightened reality, it

continues to operate even when we ourselves remain ignorant of it or forget it.

The Christians in Corinth appear to have been ignorant of it. Or they had forgotten, perhaps, that the Word of God is a two-edged sword, bringing both blessings and curses, depending on our attitude. By sharing the bread and wine they were proclaiming their oneness in Christ—their covenant unity—while at the same time the church was split from top to bottom by factions and gross selfishness.

‘That is why many among you are weak and sick,’ Paul concludes, ‘and a number of you have fallen asleep’—in other words, have died prematurely.<sup>13</sup> Their ignorance or forgetfulness, whichever it was, clearly had done nothing to shield them from God’s judgment.

Some have argued that we live in a different age from them, with different values, and that therefore we can’t expect the same blessings (for sincerity) and penalties (for duplicity) to apply to us.

For one who makes such a strong appeal to the New Testament, it is astonishing to see Howard Marshall taking such a view. He comments: ‘Paul interprets these calamities as judgments upon sin. It is, therefore, Paul’s *interpretation* of these events which raises questions. All that we can say is that he believed that divine judgment could overtake those who participated unworthily in the sacrament; it is not a view that is generally shared in modern Western Christendom which holds that, whatever may have happened in the first century, this kind of connection cannot be drawn today.’<sup>14</sup>

But the connection can and, I am convinced, must be drawn. Of course, some professing Christians, many of them unregenerate, will remain content to go through the motions

of bread-eating and wine-drinking in ritualistic church services. They have no desire for the seven-days-a-week living oneness that the meal implies. Those, for example, who cringe even at the ‘sign of peace’—an optional handshake or similar greeting during the Church of England communion service—will have no time for the deeper togetherness of life and worship that marks a true covenant community.

Just as some go through a form of baptism and, being unregenerate, come out unchanged except for being wet, these will ‘take communion’ and leave unchanged except for the few grams of bread and wine in their stomachs. Their eating and drinking is so far removed from Christ’s intention that it is hard to see them coming under divine judgment for it. Their participation isn’t evil; it’s just irrelevant—and should be discouraged for that very reason.

But right across the denominations today there are men, women and children, truly the Lord’s, with a deep hunger for more reality—in their personal walk with God and in their church life. It is a worthy desire.

Yet they must realise that to draw near to a covenant-keeping God, especially in the breaking of bread, has double implications. It brings his covenant blessings closer: love, strength, healing and provision come within reach in a whole new way. But the covenant penalties come closer, too: we can’t share in the covenant meal in sinful disregard of our fellow-believers and get away with it.

*Chapter 15 NOTES*

<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:28-30

<sup>2</sup> E.F. Kevan, *The Lord's Supper*, Evangelical Press, 1966, p46

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 23:5

<sup>4</sup> W. Barclay, *The Lord's Supper*, SCM Press, 1967, p45

<sup>5</sup> John 13:2

<sup>6</sup> John 13:26-27

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 26:22

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 26:23

<sup>9</sup> Mark 14:18

<sup>10</sup> John 13:18

<sup>11</sup> Mark 14:20

<sup>12</sup> Mark 14:42-43

<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:30

<sup>14</sup> I.H. Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper*, Paternoster Press, 1980, p115