

THE MEANING OF BAPTISM

To begin our study on the ordinances of the church, I would like to focus your attention on baptism. In the first two lessons we will explore its meaning and its relationship to salvation, then we will consider what the Bible teaches about the Lord's Supper.

You may have noticed that I referred to baptism as an *ordinance*--not a *sacrament*--of the church. I did so for a very definite reason. There are those who, in using the term *sacrament* to apply to baptism, view it wrongly as a means of imparting some special grace. I realize that there are some who use the word *sacrament* without any such intended application. However, because of the wrong connotation given the term by others, I prefer to call baptism an *ordinance* rather than a *sacrament*.

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SACRAMENTALISM

When the word *sacrament* was first applied to baptism in the latter part of the second century AD, it was associated with some erroneous ideas that had been drawn into Christendom from the Greek mystery religions. The converts from paganism were accustomed to having cleansing ceremonies for spiritual purification, and they began to think of baptism as a means by which the stain of sin was removed. These former pagans had been involved in practices they had looked on as having special powers, so it was only a small step for them to view the waters of baptism as possessing redemptive value.

Constantine, the Roman emperor who made Christianity the state religion in the fourth century, reportedly postponed his baptism until he was on his deathbed. We presume that he hoped all his sins would be washed away just before he died.

By the 12th century, as many as 30 different rites and ceremonies were being practiced in the church. These were called either "mysteries" or "sacraments." That number, of course, has been gradually reduced, but the term *sacrament* has been retained. And for many it still refers to something

that provides a special means of grace. These people therefore think of salvation as a combination of faith, good works, and the sacraments. The biblical teaching of salvation by grace through faith alone has been lost to them.

Yes, sacramentalism is still with us today. Because of the misleading connotation attached to the word *sacrament*, I repeat my conviction that we should be very careful to refer to the *ordinances* rather than the *sacraments* of the church. So important is it that we make plain the way of salvation by grace through faith--apart from works or ritual--that even in our terminology we must avoid giving the impression that baptism has any saving power.

I would never baptize anyone who had the idea that doing so would wash away his sin. If I were the pastor of a local church and someone requested to be baptized, I would first ask him if he knew its meaning. I'd make sure he understood that it has no saving power whatever. I would then want to hear from his own lips a clear testimony that he has recognized what the Lord Jesus accomplished for him at Calvary through His sacrifice for sin, and that he has placed his trust in Christ, and in Him alone, for salvation. Being assured of that, and satisfied that he recognized baptism as an ordinance rather than a sacrament of the church (that it has no redemptive value), I would gladly encourage him to be baptized.

In this series of lessons we will discuss only two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, rather than the so-called "seven sacraments of the church." There are those who insist that baptism, confirmation, penance, the partaking of the bread and the wine, ordination, marriage, and extreme unction are all to be recognized as sacramental. They therefore look on each of these observances as a means by which supernatural grace is received. According to this belief:

Baptism is thought to wash away the stain of sin.

Confirmation (which includes laying on of hands, anointing, and prayers) is said to bestow the sevenfold grace of the Holy Spirit on the person who has already been baptized.

In **penance**, the forgiveness of post-baptism mortal sins is supposedly obtained by those who are truly sorry for their sin, make confession, and perform the duties imposed on them.

In **ordination**, a special grace is said to be given for the work and temptations involved in serving God.

When the **bread** and **wine** are blessed, it is asserted that they actually become the body and blood of Christ, and that the one who partakes of them receives a measure of grace.

In **marriage**, the man and woman joined in wedlock are said to receive grace to discharge faithfully the duties of the marital state until death.

In **extreme unction**, those who appear to be near death are anointed with oil and prayed over. This is done, supposedly, to impart special grace, enabling the dying soul to confide in the mercy of God and to resist the final attacks and temptations of the devil.

The idea of supernatural bestowment of grace through the ritual is prominent in each of these seven "sacraments." We don't see it this way. Rather than recognizing seven sacraments which are claimed to impart some spiritual graces, we observe only two ordinances: baptism and the Lord's Supper. We see them as symbolizing certain spiritual realities.

Some religious groups recognize a third church ordinance--foot-washing. Following the example of Christ with His disciples, they engage in that practice as an outward expression of humility, and of their willing submission to one another. Although we may not follow that custom, we do respect those born-again believers who do.

With all of this in mind, let's take a closer look at the ordinance of water baptism.

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WATER BAPTISM

Now, I realize that I am discussing a very controversial subject. Differing views about the mode of baptism, its recipients, and its formula are sincerely held and taught by various churches. Some say immersion is the proper way to baptize; others think sprinkling or pouring is acceptable. Some insist that only believers should be baptized, while others affirm that babies should be included. Some ministers say, "I baptize you in the name of Jesus." Others

follow the formula, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Still others combine those phrases into a rather lengthy statement.

You may wonder how we can address all those differing views in only two lessons. Well, it's impossible. But I am not interested in discussing those details about baptism which do not affect our sense of oneness in Christ. My primary disagreement is with those who make water baptism essential to salvation--who teach that it actually washes away sin or contributes to the new birth. I am further troubled by someone who says, "Unless you are baptized by someone in our group for the remission of sins, you cannot be sure you are going to heaven." So in this chapter and the next, I'd like to concentrate on the following two questions:

What is the meaning of baptism?

Does baptism save?

There should be no doubt about the answers. First let's address the question:

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WHAT IS THE MEANING OF BAPTISM?

The answer is found in Romans 6:1-7. To appreciate what the apostle was saying here, we should keep in mind that in the preceding chapters (Rom. 3--5) Paul convincingly established the truth that salvation is by grace through faith. After indicating the depth of human sinfulness and emphasizing the failure of the law to bring salvation, he made it clear that the only way a holy God declares sinners righteous is through their faith in Christ, the perfect sacrifice for sin (see Rom. 3:19-28). To demonstrate that human works have nothing to do with salvation, Paul pointed out that Abraham was justified *before* he was circumcised (see 4:1-12). He said in Romans 5:1:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul then drew an analogy between the first Adam, who brought condemnation and death by his one act of disobedience, and Jesus Christ, the

last Adam, who provided justification and life for all through His one act of obedience.

In the first five chapters of Romans, the apostle stated clearly that salvation is received by faith and faith alone. Knowing that some people would misunderstand or deliberately misrepresent his teaching, Paul anticipated an objection by saying:

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? (Rom. 6:1).

In answer to his own question, he went on to say:

Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? (Rom. 6:2).

When a person receives the Lord Jesus as his Savior, he dies to the domination of sin. Yes, in Christ believers have died to sin, and this is the truth signified in baptism. By going down into the waters of baptism, we who have placed our trust in Christ testify that through our union with Him we have been buried with Him in His death. Having died to sin, we are no longer under its condemnation or bondage. Then, our emergence from the waters of baptism signifies that through our union with the living Lord we have been raised from death with Him. We now have new life--that which gives us spiritual victory. Here is what the apostle himself told us:

Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4).

Water baptism speaks of our identification with Christ. By that identification we are delivered from the condemnation and bondage of sin and brought into a life of peace with God and triumph over sin. Baptism, therefore, has served symbolically as an introductory rite from the Day of Pentecost onward. It is the new believer's first step of obedience. It is his public identification with Christ. The apostle said:

Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? (Rom. 6:3).

When Paul made reference to believers being "baptized into Christ Jesus," he used an expression that's identical in construction to a statement in 1 Corinthians 10:2, where he said that the Israelites were "baptized into Moses." The Israelites, having already chosen to follow Moses out of Egypt, were openly identified with him when they passed through the Red Sea. In like manner, we become followers of the Lord Jesus the moment we place our trust in Him. And in our baptism "into Christ Jesus," we openly identify ourselves with Him as our leader and guide.

In his book *Epistle to the Ephesians*, F. F. Bruce made this statement in reference to the words in Ephesians 4:5, "One Lord, one faith, one baptism": Baptism in water continued to be the outward visible sign by which individuals who believed the gospel . . . were publicly incorporated into this spirit-baptized fellowship--"baptized into Christ" (Gal. 3:27). It must be remembered that in New Testament times repentance and faith, regeneration and conversion, baptism in water, reception of the Holy Spirit, . . . admission to church fellowship . . . were all part of a complex of events which took place within a short time. . . . Logically they were distinguishable, but in practice they were all bound up with the transition from the old life to the new (*Epistle to the Ephesians*, Revell, 1961, p.70).

Baptism, then, is a testimony of our death to sin, of our severance from its domination, and of our pledge to live a new life through our faith-union with Jesus Christ. During the first century, baptism quickly followed salvation and was closely associated with membership in the local church.

No one should ever make the mistake of depending on baptism as a basis of his hope for heaven. Whether baptized by sprinkling, pouring, immersion, or all three, a person may still be unsaved. The only way you receive the forgiveness of sin and the gift of everlasting life is through a personal acceptance of the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior.

BAPTISM & SALVATION

A minister who was called to the bedside of a dying man promised he would return to serve him communion. Then he offered a formal prayer and left. But the patient failed to find much comfort in the preacher's promise. He knew very well he had sinned against God and needed forgiveness. How a ritualistic observance of the Lord's Supper could possibly do him any good

made no sense to him, and he couldn't sleep that night. When a nurse came in and found him awake, she engaged him in conversation, read him some verses from the Bible, and then had the joy of leading him to Christ. And what a transformation! That dying man experienced at once the joy of forgiveness and the assurance of being accepted into the family of God. The next day, weak as he was, he testified of his faith in Christ to everyone who entered his room. Then he lapsed into a coma and died without regaining consciousness.

The question arises: Did that man go to heaven? Some people would have serious doubts about it. This is because they believe it's essential to be baptized in order to be saved and to have our sins washed away.

Therefore, I would like us to consider the questions: Does baptism save? Does it wash away sin? Does it contribute in any way to the new birth? The answers will become evident as we review the passages of Scripture that are usually referred to as proof that a person must be baptized by water to be saved.

We have already seen in our first lesson that Romans 6:3 does not indicate that there is any saving power in baptism.

Some people believe, however, that several other passages of Scripture do teach or suggest that baptism is essential to being born again. So let's look at those verses to see if they really do portray baptism as having power to wash away sins.

BAPTISM & SALVATION

ACTS 2:38

This is the verse most often quoted by those who believe that baptism is necessary for salvation. It says:

Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In this verse Peter was addressing the same people who not only cried out for the execution of Christ but also declared, "His blood be on us and on our children" (Mt. 27:25). Here he commanded them to repent--that is, to change

their minds--and to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ "*for the remission of sins.*" Does that mean that baptism is the agent of forgiveness? In other words, is a person baptized so that he can receive forgiveness of sin? No! Baptism is a testimony that the one baptized has already changed his mind about Christ. Accepting Him instead of rejecting Him, he has experienced the forgiveness of sin.

What does Acts 2:38 mean when it says, "Repent, . . . and be baptized . . . for the remission of sins"? Here is a possible explanation. A. T. Robertson, a well-known Greek scholar, has pointed out that the Greek preposition *eis*, translated "for" in the phrase "for the remission of sins," may also mean *because of*. An example of this can be found in Luke 11:32, where the text says that the people of Nineveh "repented at the preaching of Jonah." The word *at* is a translation of the same Greek term *eis* found in Acts 2:38. The people of Jonah's day, you see, did not repent *for* his preaching but *because of* it.

Then too, according to some Greek scholars the word *eis* (translated "for" in Acts 2:38) may also mean, "with a view toward." According to that possible meaning, the people to whom Peter was preaching were to repent and be baptized *with a view toward* the forgiveness of their sins. Acts 2:38 does not teach that baptism brings the remission of sins.

When Peter preached the gospel to the Roman centurion Cornelius, the Holy Spirit came upon the entire household when they believed (see Acts 10:44-48). Even during that transition period in the early days of the church, therefore, people were saved and received the Holy Spirit *before* they were baptized in water.

A second verse quoted by those who teach that water baptism has some special spiritual efficacy is:

BAPTISM & SALVATION

ACTS 22:16

In this passage, Ananias said to the recently converted Saul of Tarsus: Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.

In trying to understand the meaning of the words "Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins," we must follow this basic rule of Bible study: Interpret every verse in the light of the clear teaching set forth in the rest of Scripture. Since the truth of justification by faith is declared plainly in the Bible, we know that Saul was forgiven the very moment he met Christ on the Damascus Road and believed on Him. We are therefore safe in concluding that his baptism was the outward and physical sign of his inward and spiritual cleansing from sin by the grace of God.

Another passage often misinterpreted as teaching that baptism plays a part in saving us is:

BAPTISM & SALVATION

I PETER 3:18-21

The passage reads as follows:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us--baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

What did Peter mean in verse 21 when he said, "There is also an antitype which now saves us--baptism"? Was he indicating that water baptism in itself has any saving power? No, not at all! Rather, he saw the waters of baptism in much the same way he did the deluge in Noah's day. Although those floodwaters destroyed a wicked world of sinners, they in turn saved Noah and his family by buoying them up as they rode out the storm in the ark. In that sense, Peter could say in verse 20 that "a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water." We know, of course, that the waters saved them indirectly. They escaped by floating in the ark while everything else was being submerged. And the deliverance of Noah's family under those circumstances reminded Peter of baptism. Referring to the "eight souls . . . saved through water," he said, "There is also an antitype which now saves us--baptism" (1 Pet. 3:21). Even as Noah and his family in the ark were "saved" by the very same waters that judged the rest of the world, so also the waters of God's judgment poured out on Christ at Calvary for the sins of the

world became the means whereby all who are in the ark of safety, the Lord Jesus Christ, are saved.

Please notice that Peter went on to say baptism "saves us," figuratively. It is "not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God" (1 Pet. 3:21). Peter was not talking about the outward washing of the body; he was speaking of what is really necessary--an inward spiritual cleansing that is experienced only by those who have received Christ's forgiveness. No, baptism itself does not remove sin. It is a symbolic testimony of an inner cleansing that has already occurred.

Now a few comments about one other passage that is sometimes mistakenly related to water baptism.

BAPTISM & SALVATION

TITUS 3:5

The verse reads:

Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit.

Paul indicated in this verse that God has saved us "through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit." This has been taken by some as a reference to baptism, and they therefore conclude that baptism is essential to regeneration.

In speaking of the "washing of regeneration," however, the apostle was referring to a cleansed life, not baptism. In verse 3, he had spoken of the unsaved as "foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another." In verse 5, he went on to declare that "not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration." That speaks of the cleansing that accompanies the new birth. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new (2 Cor. 5:17).

The implied reference to water in the word *washing* in Titus 3:5 should be understood in the light of the Old Testament. In the ritual of the Mosaic economy, as recorded in Leviticus, water was used as a symbol of cleansing.

And when the prophet Ezekiel portrayed Israel's future conversion, he quoted God's promise as follows:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols (36:25).

The washing of regeneration, therefore, is a fitting symbol of the cleansing that the believer receives from God through the new birth. With this in mind, read what Paul wrote to the Ephesians:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word (Eph. 5:25-26).

The "washing of water by the word" is related to spiritual cleansing. Water baptism is not a means of regeneration or spiritual cleansing; rather, it is symbolic of salvation and the spiritual cleansing we enjoy through our union with Christ by faith.

Even though baptism has no power to save us from our sins, we must be careful not to minimize its place in the life of a Christian. Because baptism has no saving efficacy and is not mandatory for salvation, some believers have concluded that it's really quite unimportant. But they're wrong! Although it's true that baptism is not essential to salvation, this does not make it merely an option for Christians. Doing the will of God is never an optional matter. The Lord Jesus gave His disciples this clear command:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:19).

And on the Day of Pentecost, the record says:

Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers (Acts 2:41-42).

These 3,000 people converted on the Day of Pentecost are models for us. They believed, they were baptized, they gathered for instruction, they broke bread with one another, and they prayed together.

Baptism is important. It's a testimony to the believer's identification with Christ. And if you know Him as Savior, the Lord wants you to be baptized

and to identify with a local assembly of believers who meet for the preaching of the Word, the administration of the ordinances, and the practice of mutual nurture, admonition, and discipline. If you are born again but have not been baptized, or have not united with a local church that is true to the Word, I urge you to do so.

Perhaps you have never accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. I would remind you that salvation through a personal belief in Christ is first and foremost. Admit your spiritual need. Acknowledge that the Lord Jesus died on the cross to pay the price for your sins. Agree that He arose from the dead as proof that the death penalty was paid in full. Then receive Him. In other words, by an act of faith, place your trust in Him. The Bible says that "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom. 10:13). After you have done that, your next steps should be baptism and church membership--not in order to be saved but because you have *already* experienced the saving grace of God by placing your faith in Christ. The Bible gives this promise:

If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation (Rom. 10:9-10).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

As we continue our discussion of the ordinances of the church, I'd like to consider with you the significance of the Lord's Supper. This wonderful event in the life of a Christian should be:

A Memorial Observance

A Symbolic Observance

A Continuing Observance

A Church Observance

My prayer is that the Lord will use this study to give us a better understanding of the communion service and lead us into a more meaningful participation.

First of all, the Lord's Supper should be:

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

A MEMORIAL OBSERVANCE

Beginning with verse 23 of 1 Corinthians 11, the apostle Paul wrote as follows:

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me" (1 Cor. 11:23-25).

When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, He said, "This do . . . in remembrance of Me." Such a reminder hardly seems necessary--for us nor for the disciples. After all, they would be firsthand witnesses of those awful scenes leading up to and culminating in the crucifixion. How would they ever forget the agony of Christ in Gethsemane? The cruel maltreatment during His night of trial? His brutal scourging by the Roman soldiers? His journey to Golgotha under the weight of the cross? His wracking pain when the nails were driven through His hands and feet? Or His God-like conduct while hanging and dying on the cross?

Sorry to say, it would be all too possible even for His followers to forget. So preoccupied could they become with proclaiming the message of forgiveness, declaring the truth of the resurrection, and solving the problems in the churches they had founded that they might seldom reflect deeply upon that which they had witnessed in Gethsemane and at Golgotha.

And friend, we also need the Lord's Supper as a reminder of what the Lord Jesus endured for us when He died to pay for our sins. It's possible to become so busy in the work of the gospel, and so completely engrossed in contemplating the glory that awaits us, that we fail to reflect upon the awful price that was paid to make it all possible.

Remembering the Lord as we gather with other believers fills our hearts with gratitude. It brings to our minds those scenes of our Lord's suffering portrayed in the Gospels--the Savior's arrest in Gethsemane, the mocking,

the scourging, the abuse at the trial, and the pain and the shame of His crucifixion. Indeed, the Lord's Supper is a touching memorial.

How fitting, therefore, is this hymn written especially for the communion service by James Montgomery:

According to Thy gracious word,
In meek humility,
This will I do, my dying Lord:
I will remember Thee.
Remember Thee and all Thy pains
And all Thy love to me;
Yes, while a breath, a pulse remains,
Will I remember Thee.

Then, too, the Lord's Supper should be:

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER A SYMBOLIC OBSERVANCE

The elements of the Table of the Lord are symbols of what was involved in His sacrifice as the Lamb of God in providing our salvation.

The *bread* represents the *body* of Christ. In chapter 2 of his first epistle, the apostle Peter said this about the Lord Jesus:

Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness--by whose stripes you were healed (1 Pet. 2:22-24).

Jesus, the sinless One, took our sins upon Himself. Yes, He became our substitute, bearing our sins in His own body on the cross. He died to provide forgiveness and life for a world of sinners. This is what we should remember when we partake of the bread in our observance of the Lord's Supper.

The *cup* symbolizes the *blood* of the Lord Jesus, which was shed to pay for the sins of the world. In verse 24 of Mark 14, we are told that as Jesus and His disciples were eating the Passover meal He said, "This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many." Therefore, in the communion service, as we hold the cup in our hands, we should thank God for the blood

of Christ, which was shed to secure our redemption and to cleanse us from sin.

The bread and the cup are symbolic of the body and blood of the Lord Jesus. They remind us of what He endured to provide salvation, pointing to that event on which we base our hope for all eternity.

Some people claim that when the bread and wine are consecrated, they change into the actual body and blood of Christ. They object to our speaking of the bread and wine as symbols. To support their claim, they remind us that Jesus said in reference to the bread and the cup, "This is My body" and "This is My blood." He did not say, they argue, "This bread symbolizes My body" or "This wine symbolizes My blood." We should remember, however, that the Lord Jesus on occasion used symbolic or figurative language. In John 15, for example, He referred to Himself as "the vine." I'm sure His disciples knew that He was speaking figuratively. They certainly did not expect to see Him as an actual vine! Rather, they recognized what He was saying to be symbolic. With Christ portrayed as a vine, and His followers as the branches, the truth of our union with and dependence on Him is taught in a forceful and unique manner.

Our Lord also used figurative language when He said, "I am the door" (John 10:9) and "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35). Now, no one, in Jesus' day believed that Jesus was claiming to be an actual door made of wood or an actual piece of bread. He was speaking figuratively. And when He referred to the bread and the wine, He declared, "This is My body" and "This is My blood." We should understand that He was simply using figurative language. I should also point out a serious error in doctrine related to the claim that the bread and the wine actually become the flesh and blood of Christ. Some who take this view go on to conclude that the Lord Jesus is crucified again every time the bread and the wine are partaken of. The Bible, however, makes it very clear that the sacrifice of Christ on the cross was a once-and-for-all payment for sin. In the book of Romans, Paul said this about Christ: For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God (6:10).

And we find these words in the book of Hebrews:

As it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation (9:27-28).

And Hebrews 10:12,14 says:

But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.

Christ died only once. He arose from the grave only once. He ascended into heaven only once. He is now seated at the right hand of God, where He will remain until He raptures His saints, judges them, and returns to earth as its rightful king. He is in glory, exalted at the Father's right hand--and He's there in His glorified physical body. He is spiritually present everywhere, but in His glorified body He lives in heaven. The idea, therefore, that the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ, that He is somehow crucified repeatedly, is completely foreign to the teaching of the Bible.

In addition to being a memorial and a symbolic observance, the Lord's Supper should be:

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

A CONTINUING OBSERVANCE

The Lord Jesus Himself established this ordinance. Referring to Christ, the Gospel writer Luke told us:

When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him. Then He said to them, "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you" (Lk. 22:14-20).

Following the example of Christ, assemblies of believers from the earliest days of the church to the present time have observed the Lord's Supper. We are told that the first company of believers, those 3,000 men and women converted on the Day of Pentecost, "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, *in the breaking of bread*, and in prayers" (Acts

2:42). And that practice continued. In Acts 20:7 we are told that "on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight."

In Paul's first epistle to the believers in Corinth, he made it evident that the Lord's Supper was still being commemorated. In fact, the apostle said: For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes (1 Cor. 11:26).

And that is why believers everywhere continue to remember Jesus' death through this ordinance.

Finally, the Lord's Supper should also be recognized as:

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER A CHURCH OBSERVANCE

Communion should be observed in or under the supervision of the local church whenever possible. Celebrating the Lord's Supper is a solemn matter. It's rich in significance and awesome in what it portrays; so much so that carelessness in its practice among the Corinthian believers had resulted in illness and even death for some of them. Paul wrote:

He who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep (1 Cor. 11:29-30).

We must therefore be careful to make the observance of the Lord's Table a meaningful experience. We must issue warnings against entering into it carelessly or irreverently. We must also realize that this can best be done under the supervision of the local church.

I'm not saying that the Lord's Supper can only be observed in a church. There are times when believers might be isolated from an organized body of believers because of distance or circumstances. I'm thinking of Christians who are confined to homes or hospitals because of illness. These believers should not be deprived of the privilege of remembering our Lord's death, though I believe they should be served the elements by a representative of the local church.

Before concluding, let me say just a few words about the frequency of observing the Lord's Supper. Some believers "break bread" every Sunday, others do it monthly, and still others only once a quarter. The Scriptures give no command as to how often it should be observed. We therefore cannot dogmatically say that one is right and the others are wrong. Rather, "let each be fully convinced in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5). Regardless of any differences we may have about the frequency of the communion service, we should all agree on this: It must be conducted with reverence and with a solemn reflection upon the great price paid for our salvation by the Lord Jesus Christ.

To summarize, the Lord's Supper is a memorial observance, a symbolic observance, a continuing observance, and a church observance. It reminds us of the great sacrifice involved in providing for our salvation. The bread and the cup are symbols of the body and blood of Christ. We are to continue our remembrance of Christ "till He comes." And, if possible, the observance of the Lord's Supper should be under the supervision of the local church.

THE OBSERVANCE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

In many churches today, the celebration of the Lord's Supper is simply tacked on to the end of a regular service. It's almost like an afterthought. A few verses of Scripture are quickly read, a brief prayer is offered, and the elements are distributed. In this kind of atmosphere it is doubtful that anyone can give much serious thought to the significance of the occasion. As a result, many worshipers leave their churches holding the same grudges and nursing the same hatreds they had when they entered.

Not everyone, of course, takes such an attitude toward the observance of the Lord's Table. In fact, some go to the opposite extreme. They are so conscious of their imperfections, and so frightened by Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 11 about eating and drinking "unworthily," that they either take communion with great fear or they stay away from the service altogether.

To help avoid these two extremes, I would like to suggest three characteristics of a proper observance of the Lord's Supper. A correct understanding of its significance will not keep us away from the communion table; rather, it will draw us to it and encourage us to participate in a conscientious and meaningful way.

When the Lord's Supper is observed properly, there should be:

[Sincere Appreciation](#)

[Self-Examination](#)

[Brotherly Consideration](#)

My prayer is that this study will help God's children come to the Table of the Lord in a way that is pleasing to Him and with an attitude that brings the greatest blessing.

The first characteristic of a proper observance of the Lord's Table is:

THE OBSERVANCE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

SINCERE APPRECIATION

The very sight of the bread and the cup (symbolic of the body and blood of Christ, reminding us of His great sacrifice at Calvary) should fill our hearts with thanksgiving and praise to the Lord. Referring to the Lord Jesus, Luke told us:

He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me" (Lk. 22:17-19).

Please notice that we are told in verse 17, Jesus took the *cup and gave thanks*. And in verse 19 we read that He took *bread and gave thanks*. When our Lord gave thanks, He was not "asking the blessing" at a dinner. He and His disciples had already finished the Passover feast. What our Lord prayed over was only some unleavened bread and a cup of wine. He may have been offering thanks for what the bread and the wine signified--the sacrifice that would provide redemption for mankind. Regardless of the subject of our Savior's thanksgiving, however, there should be sincere appreciation and thanks in our hearts as we partake of the elements.

The second characteristic of a proper observance of the Lord's Supper is:

THE OBSERVANCE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER SELF-EXAMINATION

By looking into our own hearts and lives, we should make sure that there is nothing unconfessed and uncorrected which might result in our partaking of the Lord's Supper unworthily. Some of the Christians in the early church at Corinth had evidently taken a light and frivolous attitude toward the Lord's Supper. The apostle Paul therefore wrote to them as follows:

Whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body (1 Cor. 11:27-29).

Please notice what the apostle said in verse 27. The Greek word translated "guilty" is *enochos*. It may mean "to be liable to the penal effect of a deed." Some say, therefore, that to be "guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" means that God looks upon the offender (the one who eats and drinks unworthily) as guilty of crucifying Christ. Ellicott's *Commentary on the Whole Bible* offers this word of explanation: "Sin was the cause of that body [of Christ] being broken and that blood [of Christ] shed, and therefore the one who unworthily uses the symbols of them becomes a participator in the guilt of those who crucified that body and shed that blood."

Whether or not you agree with such an interpretation, there's no escaping the fact that a careless and irreverent celebration of the Lord's Supper is a very serious matter. The person who eats and drinks unworthily shows a disregard, almost a contempt, for the broken body and shed blood of the Savior. That's why it is very important for us to engage in careful self-examination when we come to the Table of the Lord.

The apostle Paul, having indicated the sad consequences of eating and drinking "unworthily," went on to say:

But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup (v.28).

The word *examine* in that verse can mean "to test." As we gather at the Table of the Lord, we have the obligation to test our lives. A good way to do

this is to ask ourselves some probing questions about our actions, our motives, and our relationships.

First of all, in reference to our *actions*, we might raise such questions as these: Are we conducting ourselves like Christians at home, at work, and in every contact with others? Is our language becoming to a Christian? What about our habits? Are we wasting time? Are we watching the wrong kind of television programs? Are we reading books that feed our souls? Are we faithful in our spiritual obligations?

Then, in reference to our *motives*, we can test ourselves by asking questions like these: Why do we go to church? Why do we give our financial support to it? Why do we teach Sunday school? Are we doing what's right for the right reasons? Or are we doing what is good to boost our own egos or to impress our peers? Our service for the Lord and what we do for others ought to be performed because we love the Lord supremely and our neighbors as ourselves.

Finally, in reference to our *relationships* with others, we should ask questions like these: Are we kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving? Do we owe anyone an apology? Do we have wrongs to make right? Are we harboring ill will or an unforgiving spirit toward those who may have wronged us?

Yes, as we anticipate eating the bread which represents the body of Christ, and as we drink from the cup which represents His blood, we must be sensitive to our sins, our faults, and our failures. We should see them in the light of the tremendous price Christ paid to secure our redemption. And with that awareness, we must confess our sins and determine with God's help to forsake them. Doing that, we can claim that wonderful promise in 1 John 1:9.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Having been cleansed "from all unrighteousness," therefore, we will not be eating and drinking unworthily. Since it was our sin that nailed Christ to the accursed tree, we would be guilty of sacrilege if we commemorated His great sacrifice at Calvary while living in deliberate sin with no intention of confessing or forsaking it. To partake of the bread, a symbol of the body of Christ that was given for us, and to drink of the cup, a symbol of His blood shed for our sins, while harboring ill will toward a brother or sister in Christ would be an affront to Him. It would be like adding insult to injury. At the

communion table, therefore, as we engage in self-examination and our sins and failures come to mind, we should confess them, forsake them, and accept the forgiveness of God. Failing to do so--partaking of the elements of the Lord's Table with no concern for the sin in our lives--can result in chastening. If we do judge ourselves, however, the punishing hand of God can be avoided. Paul said:

He who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged (1 Cor. 11:29-31).

Of course, not *all* weakness, not *all* sickness, not *all* death is the result of such judgment. In fact, it could very well be that God is not judging abuses at the Lord's Table in our day in exactly the same way as in the early church. Regardless of the manner in which the heavenly Father chooses to chastise His children, the apostle's words about the consequences of eating and drinking unworthily should encourage us to engage in sincere self-examination and honest self-judgment in preparation for the Lord's Supper. What a difference it would make in the Christian community, and in society at large, if we who profess to believe in Christ would be careful to avoid eating and drinking unworthily at the Table of the Lord! If we all observed this, no believers would ever remain at odds with one another. We would all forgive each other freely, even as Christ has forgiven us. If we obeyed this command, the misunderstandings that cause so much strife and tension would melt away. Relationships in our homes, in our churches, and in our places of employment--yes, everywhere--would be revolutionized. The watching world would be impressed. And those around us would see that Christ really does make a difference in the lives of those who have placed their trust in Him.

The third characteristic of a proper observance of the Lord's Supper is:

THE OBSERVANCE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

BROTHERLY CONSIDERATION

The apostle Paul, writing in 1 Corinthians 10 said:

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of

Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread (vv.16-17).

Some believe that Paul's words in verse 17, "we all partake of that one bread," may reflect a practice in the early church. A sheet of unleavened bread was passed through the congregation. Each believer broke off a piece for himself. The smaller portion denoted the truth that Christ died for each individual. And the larger portion spoke of the truth that they all shared a common salvation and made up one body. Yes, as we gather with our brothers and sisters in Christ at the Table of the Lord, we should be conscious of our oneness with those who partake of the elements with us. Although we eat only an individual piece of bread, we should keep in mind that as believers we are all members of one body--the body of Christ. As born-again believers, we all share the wonderful benefits of our Savior's atoning work at Calvary.

One of the glories of the Christian faith is that we are all made spiritual equals through salvation. Rich and poor alike become the children of God, members of His family. The millionaire and the pauper, when placing their trust in Christ, both experience the same new birth, are indwelt by the same Holy Spirit, and share the same hope. How glorious, therefore, the truth of our equality in Christ! The apostle Paul said:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26-28).

Remembering our Lord as we gather for communion, we should be very conscious of our oneness in the Lord with our fellow believers. We should see them as our brothers and sisters in Christ. When we do, there is brotherly consideration, another characteristic of a proper observance of the Lord's Supper.

To summarize, the communion service should be an edifying and strengthening experience, but this can happen only if we are completely sincere in our observance of it. We must enter into it with sincere appreciation, self-examination, and brotherly consideration. If these elements are present when we assemble with fellow believers to remember

the Lord's death, it truly becomes a life-transforming commemoration of our Savior's love and sacrifice for us.