

The Supper—Weeping or Rejoicing?

By CALVIN P. HABIG

SHE was a very large middle-aged Negro woman; I was a white middle-class teenager sitting behind her. Several churches were sharing together in a time of worship that included gathering together around the Lord's table.

Soon after the distribution of the emblems began, my own meditation was interrupted by deep sighs followed by spasmodic breathing from the woman in front of me. Her heavy breathing quickly turned to sobs of grief. The longer the service lasted, the more vocal became her cries of sorrow.

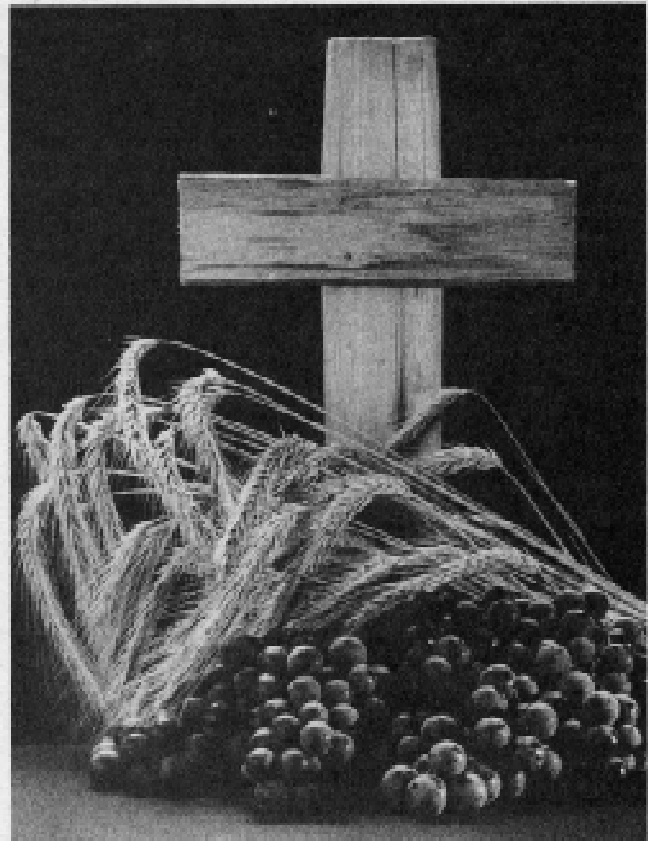
This woman was expressing quite outwardly what many of us feel inwardly when we gather to partake of the elements of the Communion—genuine grief. The Lord's Supper is one of the most solemn and sacred times in the worship of the church and of the believer. It is a memorial to the most important death in history: the death of the Son of God.

And yet, too often those celebrating the Lord's Supper emphasize only one part of the content of Communion. On the one side of the coin is the sorrow that is produced by knowing of the great sacrifice and pain of Jesus on Calvary. The other side of the coin, however, is the realization that the Lord's Supper should be one of the times of greatest rejoicing in the worship service. It should be one of the happiest times; it should be one of the times of greatest celebration!

Thanksgiving—Why is the Lord's Supper a time of rejoicing and celebration? First, because it is a time of thanksgiving. There are many churches today in which the Lord's Supper is known as the "Eucharist." "Eucharist" simply means "thanksgiving." The word is derived from the Greek word *eucharisteo* which means "to give thanks." In Matthew 26 we learn that when Jesus took the bread and the fruit of the vine which would serve as the emblems in the institution of the Supper, He "eucharisted" them (or He gave thanks for them), and He gave them to His disciples.

Just as Jesus gave thanks for the elements that were to be used in the Lord's Supper, so our celebration of the supper can be a thanksgiving. We are thankful that through Christ's death we have received forgiveness of sin. The main purpose of Christ's death was so that men's sin could be forgiven. In Ephesians 1:17 Paul's message is: "It is in and through Christ and the sacrifice of his life that we have been liberated, a liberation which means the forgiveness of sins" (Barelay).

The Lord's Supper makes us thankful because it is our constant reminder of God's love. The greatest manifestation of love is found in the action of God in Christ. John reminds us that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life," and "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 3:16; 15:13).*



(Photo by Florence Sharp)

Alexander Campbell stressed that the Lord's Supper is a celebration of God's love when he wrote that it "commemorates the love which reconciled us to God, and always furnishes us with a new argument to live for him who died for us" (*Christian System*, p. 274).

The third reason that the Lord's Supper is a time of joyful thanksgiving for us is that it is also a memorial of His resurrection and coming return. From the first, the resurrection and the Lord's Supper have been tied together. Very early in the life of the church the believers met together to celebrate the Lord's Supper, not on Thursday, when it was instituted; not on Friday, the day of his death; but on Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection.

Closely connected with this is the linkage of the Lord's Supper with the recognition that Christ will return. We do not serve a dead Savior, but we serve a risen Lord who is coming again. Paul wrote, "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

In the Old Testament the imagery of a banquet was a common Jewish symbol for the life in the age to come (Psalm 23:5; Isaiah 25:6 ff.; 55:1 ff.; Zephaniah 1:7; compare Luke 14:15 ff.; Revelation 19:9). Some would hold that the Lord's Supper

is an anticipation of the Messianic banquet in the coming age. Whether or not this imagery was intended by Jesus, we rejoice at the table because the Lord's Supper does definitely look forward to the return of our Lord.

Johannes Behm, in his article on "The Lord's Supper in Primitive Christianity" in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, states that "one experiences his true presence there and has a pledge of fellowship with him in spite of separation, and a foretaste of endless union with him in glory" (Vol. 3, p. 737).

Communion—We rejoice when we gather around the Lord's table not only because it is a time of thanksgiving, but also because it is a time of communion. In our search for a word to describe the whole of the supper, many of us have settled on this one aspect to describe the whole.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:16, 17: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation (communion) in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation (communion) in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." The Greek word *koinonia* which is here translated "participation" or "communion" is, theologically, one of the richest New Testament words. It means a "coming-together" or a "sharing."

In this section of 1 Corinthians 10, Paul argues that one who participates in the Jewish sacrifices is bonded to what those sacrifices proclaim. Likewise, one who participates in the pagan sacrifices shares a bond or a unity with that pagan deity, false though that god be. So, when we share in the Lord's Supper, we share intimately with Him.

Goodspeed translates verses 16 and 17 in an interested and yet clear way: "Does not the consecrated cup which we bless mean that in drinking it we share in the blood of Christ? Does not the bread that we break mean that in eating it we share in the body of Christ?"

The Lord's Supper is more than simply remembering an event in history. The Supper is bound up with who Jesus is, who we are, and our relationship. It is not a memorial meal for the dead but, like the Jewish Passover, it is "designed to proclaim as a present reality the saving acts of God on which the faith of those participating was founded" (Behm, *TDNT*, 3:739).

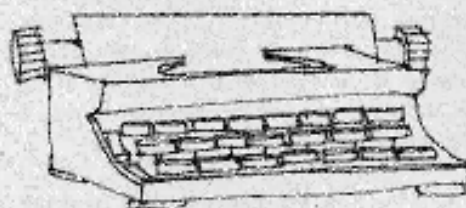
The participation (or communion) we share with Christ is not simply an historical linkage. It is very much a matter for present concern. If I share in the death of Christ, what does that mean about the manner in which I should live? If all who drink of the consecrated cup share in the blood of Christ, then we are bonded with one another. How should I treat those who

are participating with me? Our participation in the death of Christ means that Christ's death and resurrection changes how I ought to live today.

The subject of the Lord's Supper is extremely rich with meaning. It is one of the most solemn and sacred times of the church. And yet let us not confuse solemnity with sorrow and mourning. The Lord's Supper is a time of rejoicing. We rejoice in our thankfulness for what God has done in Christ, and we rejoice in the communion we share with Christ and those with whom we participate. Like the early church, let us meet regularly to break bread, "with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46).

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*All Scriptures, unless otherwise designated, are from the *Revised Standard Version*.



THE LESSON WRITER

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Home Daily Bible Readings

November 26	Psalm 1
November 27	Psalm 19
November 28	Psalm 119:33-40
November 29	Psalm 119:97-105
November 30	1 Corinthians 2:1-8
December 1	1 Corinthians 2:9-16
December 2	2 Timothy 2:10-17