

BASIC BIBLE PRINCIPLES

REMEMBERING CHRIST IN BREAD AND WINE

The very centrepiece of true Christian worship is a simple ceremony called “the breaking of bread” (Acts 2:42).¹ It can also correctly be referred to as a “communion”, a word meaning ‘sharing’ (1 Cor. 10:16) or “the Lord’s Supper” (11:20).

It was first celebrated by the Lord Jesus with his disciples on the very night of his betrayal, arrest and trial, which preceded the horror of his death on the cross. It most probably took place on a Wednesday evening: Jesus was subsequently three days and nights in the tomb before the glory of his resurrection upon the first day of the week.

The close disciples of Jesus were sharing a meal in an Upper Room in Jerusalem when, “as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ Then he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. For this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.’ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (Mt. 26:26-30).

Profound meaning

It is remarkable that the sharing of a symbolic² meal of bread and wine should be endowed with such deep spiritual meaning. The Breaking of Bread can be viewed from at least four complimentary viewpoints:

- As a **commandment** of Jesus to be obeyed: “This is my body which is given for you; *do* this in remembrance of me” (Lk. 22:19). This is a token of friendship with him, for Jesus also said, “You are my friends if you do whatever I command you” (Jno. 15:14).
- As a **remembrance** or memorial of our Lord’s suffering for us to bring forgiveness of sins: “do this in *remembrance* of me” (Lk. 22:19); for “the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jno. 1:7).
- As a **fellowship** in Jesus, signifying that true believers are one in him; as the Apostle Paul declared: “The cup of blessing . . . is it not the communion [sharing, fellowship] of the blood of Christ? The bread . . . is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread [loaf] and one body” (1 Cor. 10:16,17).
- As an acted **prophecy** of Christ’s return, for the Lord promised: “I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom” (Mt. 26:29). Consequently, it expresses the believers’ faith in the Second Coming of Jesus, 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).

For forgiven sinners

The Breaking of Bread was designed to be shared by sinners who have been forgiven through repentance and baptism. Jesus even invited Judas Iscariot to partake! Sometimes believers make the excuse for absence from the Lord’s Table that they do not feel worthy. Yet it is precisely because nobody is ‘worthy’, because all are forgiven sinners, that they are to meet to remember the sacrifice that has brought them forgiveness.

The Lord Jesus chose the simplest possible activity by which his followers could celebrate his love for them, the sharing of a frugal meal. This requires no pomp, ceremony or priest. It can be performed anywhere, at any time, with any number of believers, as Jesus

said: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:20).

The early church

From the Acts of the Apostles we learn that the Breaking of Bread was one of the fundamental activities engaged in by the baptized believers: "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). At the earliest stage, it appears that they broke bread daily in their own homes: "and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart" (2:46). It seems the Breaking of Bread was included as part of a regular meal, much as Jesus had done at the Last Supper.

The New Testament contains no commandment about which day of the week the Breaking of Bread is to be observed. However, the episode at Troas, recorded in Acts 20, reveals that by the time of Paul's visit there it had become customary to meet on the first day of the week, in celebration of the Lord's resurrection. Paul seems to have waited there a whole week so as to be present: "we . . . joined them at Troas, where we stayed seven days. Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul . . . spoke to them" (20:6,7). That memorial meal was accompanied by words of exhortation from Paul, just as Jesus had spoken to his disciples at the Last Supper (Jno. 13-16).

Unsuitable behaviour

From 1 Corinthians 11 we learn that including the Breaking of Bread in normal meals was leading to unsuitable behaviour, even to greed and drunkenness. Consequently it was established as a special and separate rite, to be performed with due reverence and self-examination (vv. 20-34). There is a clear implication that it was to be performed regularly: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till he comes" (v. 26). We also learn that the Breaking of Bread was considered an appropriate time to collect money for the support of the community: "Now concerning the collection for the saints . . . on the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside . . . that there be no collections when I come" (16:1,2).

Summary

At the Breaking of Bread the disciples of the Lord Jesus obey his command to meet together to remember his sacrifice. In so doing they demonstrate their fellowship in him, they confess their sins and recognise their need for redemption in his blood. They receive exhortation and encouragement and proclaim their belief in his Second Coming. This remembrance is to be performed regularly and upon any day of the week that is convenient (as, for example, when visiting a member in hospital), but the most appropriate is the first day of the week, the Lord's Day. It is a cause for thanks and praise that believers have been given this simple but profound way to celebrate the love and grace of our heavenly Father and His Son, and to express their faith in the promise of the coming Kingdom of God. Jesus has promised that at his coming this memorial meal will be re-enacted as the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Lk. 12:36,37; Rev. 19:9), to be shared by all who, by God's grace, are privileged to enter that glorious age.

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1. All quotations from NKJV.
 2. Church doctrines such as Transubstantiation and the Real Presence, denying that the bread and wine are symbols, insist that the actual body and blood of Christ are present, while retaining the *appearance* of bread and wine. They are based on philosophical concepts not found in the Bible.

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