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# Something *Happens* in the Supper

by Gary Holloway

Jack Reese tells a personal story familiar to many of us in Churches of Christ. As a teenager in Bible class, Jack learned about the Lord's Supper. The teacher was explaining the biblical teaching on the supper, when a student asked an obvious but important question.

"Does anything really happen in the Lord's Supper?"

"No," said the teacher without missing a beat, "that's Catholic doctrine. We believe the Lord's Supper is only a memorial. It's just symbolic."

## Only a Memorial?

Such language rings true to many of us who grew up in Churches of Christ. Each Sunday we are used to hearing prayers at the table thanking God for these "symbols" or "emblems." We are urged to remember Christ's broken body and spilled blood, represented by the bread and wine. We are moved by written as well as spoken words, for in many of our churches these words are carved on the front of the Lord's table: "This do in remembrance of me."

The early Restoration movement leaders used this same vocabulary. Alexander Campbell speaks of "the symbolic loaf" and the "emblematic cup," calling them "commemorative of the Lord's death."<sup>1</sup> To Barton W. Stone, the body of Christ is "represented by the one bread."<sup>2</sup> Walter Scott says the supper "not only leads us back, but it enables us to look forward" to the coming of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> The Lord himself "teaches us very plainly that it is commemorative," writes Robert Milligan.<sup>4</sup> Robert Richardson in his communion

meditations speaks of these "emblems of death and sorrow."<sup>5</sup>

All this is familiar language to us. The early Restoration leaders are unanimous in calling the Lord's Supper a memorial of the death of Jesus. In the supper we are to remember the one who gave his body and blood for us.

However, these early leaders did not believe the Lord's Supper was **merely** a memorial. They taught that something happened in the supper. Robert Milligan states it most clearly:

But to say it is commemorative is not enough. It has reference to more than a mere recollection of fact. It is also the medium of spiritual food to the hungry and thirsty soul.<sup>6</sup>

In the supper we remember Christ's death for us, but this remembering is more than simply calling the facts of the crucifixion to mind. In the supper our souls are changed. Something happens in the supper. It is no mere memorial.

## Just Symbolic?

You may say, "But aren't Jesus' words, 'This is my body, this is my blood,' symbolic? Surely he didn't mean the bread literally became his body and the wine literally became his blood?"

No, he didn't. That is the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, that in the Mass the bread and wine are changed physically into the body



and blood of Jesus.

However, to call the bread and wine symbolic or emblematic of Jesus' body and blood is not to say they are *just* symbols. To call them mere symbols is to say nothing really happens in the supper.

How can something be a symbol, but not merely a symbol? Think of our view of baptism. We get upset (and rightly so) when we hear our Christian friends describe baptism as "a mere symbol." By doing so, they imply that baptism is really unimportant. What matters is the meaning, not the symbol, they say. In others words, little or nothing really happens in baptism. To say otherwise is to make baptism "magical" and to believe in the Roman Catholic doctrine of baptismal regeneration.

We do not believe in the Catholic doctrine of baptismal regeneration, but we do believe something happens in baptism. Baptism is symbolic, but by that symbol we are united with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. By that symbol we come in touch with the cleansing blood of Christ. By that symbol our sins are washed away.

Do we believe the water literally, physically washes away sin? Of course not. Do we believe the baptismal water magically turns into the literal blood of Christ? No. Do we think the symbol works apart from faith? Never. So how does the water of baptism wash away our sin? How does Christ's blood save us? It is a spiritual, not physical washing.

It's the same way in the supper. The bread and wine are not physically the body and blood of Christ, but they are spiritually his body and blood. By faith they are more than physical food, they are spiritual food. The early Restoration leaders agreed on this. To Stone, we eat not just physical food, but become "joint partakers of the blood and body of Christ."<sup>7</sup> As we saw above, Milligan calls the supper "the medium of spiritual food to the hungry and thirsty soul."

In his debate with Bishop Purcell, Alexander Campbell clearly fought the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. Yet Campbell believed that one came in contact with the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper. He saw the similarity between baptism and the supper. In baptism, water spiritually cleanses the conscience. In the supper, bread and wine feed the soul.<sup>8</sup>

So the early leaders agreed that Christ is spiritually present in the supper as he is spiritually present in baptism. Someone may say, "Oh, so he is spiritually present, not really present." What can such a statement mean? How could a Christian say this? Don't we believe that the spiritual is real? Isn't God a Spirit? Don't we believe in a real God?

Jesus is spiritually present in the supper. He

is really present in the supper. In the New Testament, "spiritual" is never contrasted with "real" but with "fleshly" or "physical." Christ is not physically in the bread and wine, he is spiritually there. Really there. As Robert Richardson said of the supper, "... that which thus deals alone with realities must itself be real."<sup>9</sup>

So how did Churches of Christ get to our present widespread view of the supper as just a symbol or just a memorial, if the early leaders all thought Christ was really spiritually present? Perhaps as a result of religious controversy. By the early twentieth century, leaders like E. G. Sewell are arguing for the "emblem" language to avoid Roman Catholic error:

The bread and the wine represent to us the broken body and shed blood of Jesus; and since Catholics are pleading for transubstantiation—that is, that the bread is the real body of Christ and that the wine is his real blood—brethren have thought it best, in order to express in plainness just what they understand the Savior to mean by his expressions—that is, to express the matter as to avoid error on the subject.<sup>10</sup>

Avoiding error is a noble goal, but one must not go to an extreme to avoid it. That too is an error. It is interesting that Sewell did not give up his language on the necessity of baptism to avoid the error of the Roman Catholic doctrine of baptismal regeneration. Also note that he makes the false association between "physical" and "real" mentioned above. To hold that Jesus is really present in the supper does not force one to plead that he is physically present.

### What Difference Does It Make?

The early Restoration leaders believed the New Testament taught that Jesus was really, spiritually present in the supper. If we in Churches of Christ today came to share that conviction, what difference would it make in our worship?

Much. For one, it might change the prayers we pray over the bread and wine. It's not unusual for me to hear communion prayers like these:

"Lord, we know symbols are important, so we thank you for these." "Lord, we meet here today in obedience to your command."

"Lord, bless this bread that is a symbol of your broken body."

Such prayers are sincere and are fine as far as they go. They don't go far enough.

If we really believe Christ is present in the bread and wine, our prayers will change and our hearts will change in communion. The Lord's Supper will take on the same importance as baptism. Something happens here! In baptism, we are born anew spiritually through the blood of Christ. After birth, we need food. In the supper, we spiritually eat and drink the body and blood of Christ. By this meal our souls are fed.

If we believe this, then the supper will become more than just a command to obey, more than an example to follow, more than just a symbol. It becomes food and drink to us, nourishing our faith,

filling us with the presence of Christ. Is this not the heart of worship, to praise our God for what he has done for us in Christ and to enjoy him forever?

What do we need to change in worship? How about a change in keeping with the best of our heritage. A change that is biblical. A change that transforms us into the image of Christ. Let us proclaim to each other and to the world: "Something happens in the Supper."

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