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**Series:       The Lord's Supper**  
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**UNDERSTANDING THE LORD'S SUPPER (Part III)**

There is no more important word in Christian theology than the word *atonement*. Our word is derived from the preposition at, and the old middle English word *onement* which means "union."<sup>1</sup> This is that which our Lord Jesus did in his death; He restored the broken relationship between sinners and a holy God. The great doctrine of Christianity is that Christ died to make atonement for sinners. This is so central to Christianity that it seems to be beyond question. But such is not the case. Down through the history of the Christian Church, efforts have been made (and are still being made) to remove the word *redemptive* from the word *Christianity*.<sup>2</sup> For faith in a crucified Redeemer whose life is a ransom for sinners, they seek to substitute a "Christlike" attitude, or worse yet, a "religious" feeling. Belief in the old liberal slogan "the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man" has again gained wide acceptance in our pluralistic age, and this mindset will not tolerate a belief in the uniqueness of Christ's atoning death as the only grounds for acceptance with God.

HISTORICAL SETTING: The institution of the Lord's Supper took place at the time of the Jewish passover. The passover involved a preliminary course (*KARPAS*) accompanied by a benediction (*QIDDUS*, prayer of sanctification) spoken by the *Paterfamilias* over the first cup of wine. The preliminary dish consisted of green herbs, bitter herbs, and a sauce made of fruit puree. A bowl of salt water was placed on the table to remind them of the tears shed in Egypt. The meal proper was served but not eaten at this time. The second cup of wine (*HAGGADAH*) was placed on the table while the *Paterfamilias* gave an explanation of the Passover. The first part of the Hallel (Psalm 113-114) is sung. At that time the third aspect of the ritual, the partaking of the dinner itself, occurs. The *PATERFAMILIAS* pronounces A blessing (Heb. B□RAK) over the unleavened bread (this is the point at which Jesus probably instituted the Lord's Supper). The meal proper consisted of the paschal lamb, the bread, bitter herbs dipped in sauce, the CHAROSETH, and the lamb wrapped together. After prayer the third cup of wine was drunk called "the cup of blessing" (cf. I Corinthians 10:10). The service was closed over a fourth cup with the singing of the remainder of the Hallel (Psalm 115-118).

**I.    THE CEREMONY OF THE BREAD**

- A.   Jesus took bread. This represented His body and the body was the necessary means to the incarnation and the work Jesus was to do (cf. Hebrews 10:5).
- B.   Jesus blessed the bread. This bread, the APHIKOMEN (half of a cake of unleavened bread) was the bread of affliction. Over this Jesus pronounced a blessing, or gave thanks (EUCCHARISTE□ from which we get the word Eucharist).
- C.   Jesus broke the bread. The bread is likened to His body and is broken symbolizing that this is done for Jesus' own and is also a pledge to them that they will personally benefit from this. The language is sacrificial.
- D.   Jesus gave the bread to them. The actions of our Lord indicate in themselves the divine initiative in all the saving work.

NOTE: "This is My body" has been the source of endless debate. We briefly surveyed the various positions in lesson No. 2. Contrary to Catholicism we do not, as Protestants, believe our Lord taught that the bread was literally His body and the wine literally His blood. The copula "is" is not that of identity, but of symbolic relationship. This is its common usage both in Greek and English. Note Matt. 13:38: "The field is the world." The word "is" is used in the sense of represents (cf. also John 8:12; 10:9; I Cor. 10:4; Rev. 1:20).<sup>3</sup>

## II. THE CEREMONY OF THE CUP

Exodus 24 forms the background for the ratification of the Old Covenant. This was done by means of a blood sacrifice (24:8). It is in light of this that our Lord alludes to the ratification of the New Covenant.

- A. The significance of "blood." The word stresses the fact that the death He would die was a violent death by sacrifice (cf. Numbers 35:33).
- B. It is shed. It is not spilled. Again it is underscoring the sacrificial nature of Christ's death. It is shed "for many" (cf. Isaiah 53:11-12). The preposition "for" (HUPER) means substitution. Christ died for our sins, not merely for people as sinners, but for their sins. This is explained in various ways: He bore our sin--He was made sin for us--He was made a curse for us--He is the propitiation for our sins--He died, the just for the unjust--He redeemed us by His blood--His blood cleanses from sin--it is shed for many--He gave His life for the sheep. "Try," writes J.W. Alexander, "the diminishing and reducing process on these expressions: torture them to mean no more than the innocent self-immolation of a witness or a prophet: and you shall find yourself descending to a violent perversion which would be scorned and banished in any interpretation of any other document of mankind."<sup>4</sup>

## III. THE LORD'S SUPPER AND THE GREAT SUPPER

- A. The Exaltation of Christ. Jesus declares that He will survive His death. He will conquer and He will be exalted (cf. Luke 22:16, 18 and 19).
- B. The Consummation of the Kingdom. Luke 22:16 reads "fulfilled," stressing that the program of redemption climaxes in the Kingdom festival.
- C. The Convention of the Redeemed. Note the little phrase "with you." This is added to "drink it" in Matthew 26:29 and makes the participation of the redeemed in the fulfillment of Christ's Kingdom and glory the emphasis of Jesus' words.

CONCLUSION: I close by pointing to the words of Warfield who had to contend with liberals who wanted a "crossless" Christianity. "The redeemed in the blood of Christ, after all is said, are a people apart. Call them 'Christians,' or call them what you please, they are of a specifically different religion from those who know no such experience. It may be within the rights of those who feel no need of such a redemption and have never experienced its transforming power to contend that their religion is a better religion than the Christianity of the Cross. It is distinctly not within their rights to maintain that it is the same religion as the Christianity of the Cross. On their own showing it is not that."<sup>5</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> W.W. Skeat, A Concise Etymological Dictionary of the English Language (Clarendon, 1911), p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> Delores S. Williams, a "womanist" professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York declares, "I don't think we need a theory of atonement at all...Atonement has to do so much with death...I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff...We do not need atonement, we just need to listen to the god within...If Jesus conquered sin, it was in the wilderness, and life, not in his death," as quoted by Steve Beard in "Mainline Churches Sponsor Radical Feminist Conference: Pagan Worship Encouraged, Lesbianism Praised," American Family Association Journal, Feb. 1994, p. 17. The funding list for this conference (which was called "A Global Theological Conference By Women' for Women and Men") included the Presbyterian Church USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the National Ministries of the American Baptist Church, the Women's Division of the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ and other smaller bodies, both Catholic and Protestant.

<sup>3</sup> Gleaned from the lectures of Dr. S. Lewis Johnson Jr., my professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

<sup>4</sup> J.W. Alexander, God is Love: Communion Addresses (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), p. 211.

<sup>5</sup> "The Essence of Christianity and the Cross of Christ," The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield III (rpt. Baker, 1980), p. 444.