

# **The** *Bible & Life* **Bible Teaching Newsletter**

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## **Evangelical Revival & the Lord's Supper**

by David Dunlap

In the early church, the Lord's Supper was integral to the life of the church. The Lord's Supper was instituted by the Lord Jesus Christ in the gospels. The book of Acts lists the Lord's Supper as one of the four foundational practices of New Testament life (Acts 2:42). The apostle Paul declares that the teaching on the Lord's Supper was received by special revelation from the risen Christ (1 Cor. 11:23). The weekly Lord's Supper was significant in the life of the early church; it played a central role during the Protestant Reformation in Europe; and it was important during the Wesleyan revivals in England. In virtually every major period of church history, the Lord's Supper stood at the forefront of the life of the local church.

Throughout the history of the church, whenever the church was experiencing spiritual revival, the Lord's Supper was especially vibrant and alive. However, when the church was in spiritual decline, the worship of Christ at the Lord's Supper was stifled, muted, and shrouded in mystery. In every generation the Lord's Supper functioned as a spiritual barometer, measuring the spiritual life of the church. Sadly, the Lord's Supper has fallen on unfortunate times. To many believers, the Lord's Supper is considered an incidental ordinance of the church to be dispensed with quickly at the end of a preaching service; to others it is an ancient ceremony whose meaning is hidden in mystery and ritual. However this was not always the case.

### **The Current Situation in the Evangelical Church**

Today, as never before, the biblical practice of the Lord's Supper stands in jeopardy. There are many who are questioning its significance. Others are trivializing its importance. Others allege that the regular celebration of the Lord's Supper is an obstacle to church growth. They contend that Scripture never commands us to celebrate the Lord's Supper weekly. Long accepted principles of biblical worship are now being replaced by modern marketing techniques. Clever numerical growth strategies using sociological and demographic studies are competing with the standards and the patterns of the Word of God. Saddest of all, in many assemblies the Word of God is losing this all important battle.

If the pages of Christian history could speak, they would raise their uncompromising disapproval. Was there ever a true revival where there was not a return to true worship? Was there ever a time that the practice of the Lord's Supper was not a mark of genuine revival?

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***“The blessed Master  
knew well the  
tendency of our  
hearts to slip away  
from him. To meet  
this tendency was  
one of his objectives  
in the institution of  
the Lord's supper.  
He would gather His  
people around his  
own blessed person.  
There they might see  
the love of God for  
them and the blood  
of Christ which has  
made them fit to be  
there.”***

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**C. H. Mackintosh**  
(1820-1906)

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Would we dare neglect to examine our own spiritual condition when worship of Christ at the Lord's Supper no longer attracts our hearts? Can our hearts remain unmoved and indifferent when churchgoers crowd in to hear a rock band and drama presentation at the 11:00 service, while there are so few true worshippers found at the Lord's supper? Has the church exchanged holiness and reverence in worship for the atmosphere and glitter of Hollywood? Have we become so busy being happy that we have forgotten to be holy? Where are the true worshippers?

### **The Wesleyan Revival and the Lord's Supper**

In every great spiritual revival, the renewed emphasis and interest in the Lord's Supper was God's stamp of approval upon that movement. Interest in the Lord's Supper was never a detriment to spiritual growth. Worshipful appreciation of Christ leads to a changed heart and life. The most powerful spiritual awakenings in history have often been characterized by a two-fold renewal in worship: firstly a renewal of simplicity in the practice of the Lord's Supper, then a renewal of spiritual appreciation for the Lord's Supper.

Simplicity of worship has often been a great characteristic of true revival down through the centuries. Elaborate ceremony and arranged worship will, almost without exception, lead to dead ritual, which neither pleases God nor satisfies the heart of man. A true mark of spiritual revival time and again has been a return to worship in simplicity and the rejection of forms and ceremony of the established churches. The Wesleyan revival in England is a striking example of this practice.

The Spirit of God began to work in the hearts of a small company of believers. As they studied God's Word, they were convinced that these principles, of worship should be put into practice. In simplicity they attempted to carry out what they found in the Scriptures to be true. Soon the power of God began to change the hearts and lives of these men. As their lives changed, their hearts were burdened. Soon, to celebrate the Lord's Supper simply as the New Testament instructs, became their passion. One researcher writes of how the Lord led in their lives,

*“In November, 1729, four young gentlemen of Oxford, Mr. John Wesley, Mr. Charles Wesley, Mr. Morgan, and Mr. Kirkham of Merton College spent some evenings together in reading chiefly the Greek New Testament. To the original four, others were added to the Club, one of whom, John Clayton, son of a Manchester bookseller, led the members in a new direction. In his father's shop he had read many of the early Christian writers and was constantly illuminating discussions with references from the same. Soon the group eagerly embraced the early church practice of the weekly Lord's Supper. The evangelical revival quickly became a revival of worship as well. Hundreds of eager converts crowded into their once near-empty parish churches to receive communion often, to the consternation of the religious leaders who were unused to such enthusiasm. The evangelical leadership were quick to restore, first monthly, and then weekly communion services.” 1*

The simple way of worship also found its way into the life of believers in the north of Great Britain. Fifty-eight years later in Scotland, James and Robert Haldane, ministers of the gospel, traveled in a carriage and were well supplied with tracts which they themselves wrote, printed, and distributed. They spoke in churches and schools, but chiefly in the open air. Hundreds, and sometimes thousands, gathered to hear them; there was much power in their testimony and

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**“Our Lord  
Jesus Christ  
hath knit  
together a  
company of  
new people by  
the Lord's  
supper, most  
easy to be  
kept, most  
excellent in  
significance.”**

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**Augustine  
(354-430AD)**

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many were converted. At the fair at Kirkwall, three to four thousand listened daily, and on the Lord's day some 6,000 gathered to hear. Following the principle of New Testament, they began to take the Lord's Supper the first day of each week. Robert Haldane recalled,

*I began practising the Lord's Supper monthly. Afterwards I became convinced that on the principles I held, that I ought to observe it weekly. I met with a few individuals who erected themselves into a church; and I am convinced that any group of Christians may act as we did."* <sup>2</sup>

### **Missionary Rivals and the Lord's Supper Christian**

An accompanying hallmark to the simplicity in worship has been a great heartfelt appreciation of the Lord's Supper. A leading feature of spiritual revival has been the tenderhearted affection present in remembering the Lord Jesus Christ in His death. In America the gospel went forth to the Indians in New Jersey through the missionary David Brainerd. Here as in other places, as the Spirit of God mightily moved in the hearts of men, the spiritual revival was accompanied by a sincere appreciation of the Lord's Supper. David Brainerd wrote in his journal on July 13, 1746,

*"There appeared tender affection in the assembly under divine truth; my soul was also somewhat refreshed. I administered the Lord's Supper to 31 of the Indians. God seemed to be real and present among us. The worshippers were sweetly melted and refreshed. Oh, how they melted when the elements were first uncovered. There was scarcely a dry eye among them when I took off the linen, and showed them the symbols of Christ's body."* <sup>3</sup>

This renewed appreciation of the Lord's Supper was not unique to North America or Great Britain, but was also present in the mission fields of South America. After a number of months of preaching the gospel to Indians in the Ecuadorian jungle, missionary Jim Elliot had seen a small band of believers gather together as a New Testament church. As they began to grow in grace and spiritual maturity, the desire to remember the Lord in His death began to burn in their hearts. Jim Elliot wrote in his journal on January 16, 1955

*"With a small nucleus of baptized believers we began having a simple meeting for the breaking of bread, where Christ was exalted and worshiped. No one taught; the words of men were few. Hymns of adoration were sung, prayer was offered, and gradually the new believers began to understand the meaning of worship--offering to the Lord the love of their hearts, with simplicity and sincerity. Others began to observe this gathering from the outside. There was not much to watch. The room where we met was the schoolroom--bamboo walls and floors, thatched roof, backless benches. A small table stood in the center of the circle with a loaf of bread and a cup of wine. The Indians gathered quietly, and sat barefooted and reverent around the symbols which spoke to them of the death of their Lord Jesus, whom they had so recently come to know and love. One by one the young men would take part, suggesting a hymn, or praying, while all joined in lifting their hearts to Christ. Reminded of His death, they also thought of His coming again, and frequently ended the meeting singing 'Be happy, believers--Christ is coming'."* <sup>4</sup>

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***“At the Lord’s  
Supper it is  
Christ with  
Whom we desire  
to be occupied.  
Believers seek to  
remember Him in  
his death and  
exalt Him in  
praise and in  
worship”***

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**H. A. Ironside**  
(1876-1951)

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### INFORMATION

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It is refreshing to see Christ-centered worship at the forefront of the gathering together of the New Testament church. It pleases the heart of God and redirects the focus of our faith.

### Conclusion

Throughout the centuries the weekly practice and the genuine appreciation of the Lord's Supper was an indication of the spiritual strength of the Christian church. The past is the great interpreter of the present and a safeguard of the future. A worshipping assembly is always a spiritually robust assembly. Biblical orthodoxy leads to worshipful doxology. Where there is no vision the people perish, and likewise true, where there is no worship believers languish. When the assembly gathers together, the Lord Jesus Christ must have the first place in all things. He is the Lord of our lives and Head over the church, His body.

Unfortunately, today we are beginning to see a marked departure from this essential truth. May the church of the 2020s soon realize that the sincere appreciation and the regular practice of the Lord's Supper is a measure of her spiritual strength. The pattern is plain throughout history; when the church began to forget the Lord in worship, very soon thereafter she also forgot her calling in the world. When we ignore the voice and testimony of history we do so at our peril

### Endnotes

1. Donald Bridge and David Phypers, *Communion: The Meal That Unites*, (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1981), 124
2. E. H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church*, (London: Pickering and Inglis, Ltd, 1931), p. 298, 301
3. Jonathan Edwards, *The Life Of David Brainerd*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 280
4. Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow Of The Almighty*, (New York, NY: Harper and Row Publishers, 1956), p. 222