

THE LORD'S SUPPER - BREAKING OF BREAD - COMMUNION

By Keith Malcomson

*These articles have been written as a response to **Pagan Christianity?** a book written by Frank Viola and co-authored by George Barna. It carries the sub-title of *Exploring the Roots of our Church Practices*. All quotes are from the book.*



“The Supper had devolved from a full meal to a stylized ceremony...” (Pg.17). “But clearly Protestants...do not practice the Supper the way it was observed in the first century. For the early Christians, the Lord’s Supper was a festive communal meal...The Lord’s Supper was essentially a Christian banquet.” (Pg.192).

In *Pagan Christianity* the Lord’s Supper, otherwise known as communion or breaking of bread, has been revamped to be a communal meal without any set particular order, ceremony or conduct. It is no longer a partaking of bread and the fruit of the vine in remembrance of Christ’s death, but the partaking of a full meal in the style of a Christian banquet. Are Viola and Barna calling us to return to the correct New Testament practice of the Supper, or are they moulding it to their own thoughts, opinions, and preferences by creating their own tradition?

The act of breaking bread was first given by Jesus to the disciples (whom He called apostles) on the night which was preserved in Jewish culture for the Jewish Passover. All of the symbolism of this meal pointed to Christ alone (I Cor.5:7). It was at the traditional evening time they ate the meal together (Mt.26:26; Mk.14:22) during which Christ instituted the breaking of bread. It was “after supper” or at the point of the “supper being ended” (Lk.22:20; I Cor.11:25) that Christ took the bread and cup. So we see from this that what He was about to instruct them concerning the bread and cup was connected to the Passover meal but distinct from it and followed it.

We see this more clearly in Luke ch.22 where there are two cups mentioned. The first in verse 17 was one of the four cups of the Passover supper. But in verse 19 He mentions another cup, the cup which is given to the Church, as being “after supper” to distinguish it from the previous cup of the Passover supper. The eating and drinking of verses 15-18 is the Passover meal, but verse 19-20 is the bread and cup which is given to the Church to be practised until He returns again. In no biblical account is the bread ever separated by time from the cup. They are taken immediately after each other with the bread preceding the cup.

What we have come to know as the Lord’s Supper, communion or the breaking of bread was indeed associated with the Passover meal, but was not the meal itself. Christ was about to instruct them concerning the meaning of these two emblems of the bread and cup. They had just had a meal so the bread was not a meal in itself. Indeed the bread and cup, filled with the fruit of the vine, was and is a very simple, small and plain symbol indeed. It is very clear in the light of Scripture that when they state: “...the Lord’s Supper, when separated from its proper context of a full meal, turns into a strange, pagan-like rite” (Pg.197), is in contradiction to the clear teaching of scripture. The breaking of bread in remembrance of Christ’s death was indeed ‘separated’ as an act from the meal by Christ and the apostles themselves.

While the authors mock the traditional Evangelical practice of using ‘a thimble of grape juice and a bite

sized cracker' they do far worse with their 'potluck dinner' as representative of what Christ gave as a practice to the early church (Pg.192).

In His use of the bread and cup, Christ was very clear that this was for the primary purpose of remembering Him and His death: "...ye do shew the Lord's death" (Lk.22:19; I Cor.11:24-25, 26). The word "shew" means 'to proclaim, promulgate, declare, preach and speak of.' Paul says: "...before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you..." (Gal.3:1). By the visible testimony of the Lord's Table (the bread and the cup), and the exhortations of God's Word the death of Christ is portrayed before the eyes and in the ears of the gathered Church. It was given by Christ to the Church as a regular act to stir up the minds of the believers to remember Him and to shew forth His death. It is a memorial and celebration. It is not the act of participating in a supper-meal that reminds us of Christ's death but these two simple symbols of bread and cup.

There is an order for the Lord's Table. We are not to make up our own customs. Paul said: "I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you." This act of remembrance has been given over by Christ and committed to the Church to perform. The form of service given by Christ and practised and taught by the apostles, including Paul, was exactly the same. According to the clear command of Christ there should be a very real similarity in our practice and conduct at the table (Mt.26:26-28; Mk.14:22-24; Lk.22:19-20; I Cor.11:23-34).

In later New Testament writings we read of the believers “feasts of charity” (Jude 1:12; II Pet.2:13) or ‘agape feasts’ as they came to be known. This is only mentioned twice and both times carries warnings, rebukes and correction for allowing men, who were probably professing to be believers, who in reality were apostates, false teachers and wicked persons to participate.

The terminology used for these agape meals is nowhere used in the Gospel’s or Paul’s writings in connection with the memorial emblems of the bread and cup. The term for “feastings” which is used in both occasions is *suneuōcheō* which means to be ‘in good condition, to fare well, to entertain sumptuously in company with, and to revel together.’ These feasts seem closer to what Viola and Barna are calling for than the simple remembrance that Christ performed and commanded.

Again with the following quotes we see a determination to remove any element of seriousness, soberness, and solemnity. “The early Christians took the supper in an atmosphere of joy and celebration.” (Pg.198). “The mood was one of celebration and joy.” (Pg.192). But in contrast they infer that typical Evangelical practice is contrary to this and not according to early church practice. “The mood is somber and glum, just as it is in the Catholic church.” (Pg.196). “The Supper is often taken in an atmosphere of solemnity. We are told to remember the horrors of our Lord’s death and to reflect on our sins.” (Pg.192). “Making it a somber occasion is a departure from apostolic practise...”

Do the Scriptures depicting the first Lord's Supper on the night of Christ's betrayal, and its practice after His resurrection for the first 40 years of church history only portray a joyous celebration absent of any solemnity, sorrow, sadness, or remembrance of Christ's death as a horrific historical event of suffering?

Let's look at the Last Supper when Christ instituted this memorial act. The first thing He did after sitting down with the twelve to eat was to warn them that one of them would betray Him (Mt.26:21). As a result we are told that "they were exceeding sorrowful" (v22). He continued with this warning of betrayal during the supper, then after instituting the memorial "they sung a hymn" (v30). Christ goes on to warn them that that very night they would be offended in Him and would be scattered from Him (v31) and that Peter would deny him three times (v34). After this they entered Gethsemane where He told them "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death:" (v38). This whole event which we look back to is characterized by the very mood which is strongly despised and rejected as not being first century practice in *Pagan Christianity*.

It is worth noting again in John's Gospel the sequence of events: it was after the supper was finished that all this transpired; "supper being ended" (Jn.13:2). After the supper Christ rose from the table and washed the disciples feet (4-12) then sat down again at the table. Then being "troubled in spirit" (v21) He warned that one of them would betray Him. Then after giving Judas the piece of bread which He had dipped in the dish, Judas

left the table and went out into the night. Only then was the bread and cup taken and given. Following this we have three chapters of teaching from Christ to the disciples in order to comfort their hearts (ch.14-16). He then prayed one of His greatest prayers for them (ch.17).

When Paul comes to correct the abuses in Corinth connected to the Lord's Supper he commences with the words: "the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread:" (I Cor.11:23). It was the Holy Spirit by inspiration who inserted this simple statement concerning the Lord Jesus in order that the context of this memorial would be kept in mind and that a sobriety in the practice of the Lord's Table would be kept by believers in every age.

All of this seems a far cry from the "joyful communal meal" (Pg.195) and the "joyful, down-to-earth, nonreligious atmosphere of a meal in someone's living room." (Pg.193). Over the years I have partaken of these two emblems given by Christ to the church in many different countries, cultures and diverse church gatherings, at times great joy, thanksgiving and rejoicing mark the gathering. At other times awe, stillness and deep searching's of heart are very evident. At times individuals have wept in gratitude and in prayer, others have sung and others read of Christ's finished work. I have yet to hear any scriptural argument that would even make me stop to consider that this is not apostolic practice.

We are told that Christ “blessed” as well as “gave thanks” (Mt.26:26-27; Mk.14:22-23) for the emblems representing His Body and Blood. The word “bless” means ‘to praise, speak well of and to invoke a blessing.’ To “give thanks” means ‘to be grateful and to express gratitude.’ So the table is indeed a place to express great thankfulness. But to restrict any feeling, emotion or outburst to that of joy in a binding legalistic manner is to exceed Scripture.

“Congregants are told by the pastor that they must examine themselves with regard to sin before they partake of the elements, a practise that came from John Calvin.” (Pg.196) “In addition, tradition has taught us that taking the Lord’s Supper can be a dangerous thing.” (Pg.192).

Does the practice of the examining of your heart before partaking of the Table originate with John Calvin? And is it only a man-made tradition to believe that there is a danger when it is taken in a wrong manner with a wrong heart? What do the Scriptures say?

In I Corinthians 11 Paul again teaches that these two simple symbols of the bread and the cup are to be used in remembering Christ’s death. Please note we are nowhere in the New Testament commanded to eat a full meal or to feast together. This may be inferred and even allowed but never commanded. In verses 20-22 Paul has to deal with the problems associated with the practice of gathering together to eat a meal. When he says: “When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the

Lord's supper" (20), he was saying the problems associated with over eating or not having enough to eat destroyed the reality of gathering together to remember Christ's death. His rebuke is that: "...have ye not houses to eat and to drink in?" (22). Paul twice clearly instructs them to "eat at home" before coming together to eat the Lord's Supper (v20, 22, 33-34).

In other words to lose the act of communal eating in the public gathering of God's people is far better than to lose the real meaning of the Lord's Supper which he then immediately begins to explain and expound. He now enters the realm of divine revelation and command when he comes to the bread and cup (v23-24). Because of abuse he must now lay out the clear order which came by divine revelation. What he then teaches comes from God not man.

If a believer partakes of the table in an "unworthy" manner (v27), (that is irreverently) or in an unfit manner, which means the taking of it without care or respect because of unrepented sin, the Lord will chastise him just as a parent disciplines his child (v32). Paul says that some at Corinth who partook of the table without judging their own heart were sick and died as a result (v30). He clearly shows that these believers were distinct from sinners who in contrast would be judged by God with eternal punishment. It is worth noting how much instruction Paul gives on this (I Cor.11:27-32).

There is also a clear command to: "let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that

cup” (v28). This could not be clearer. This command is not connected to a meal or supper but to the emblems of the bread and cup. Every believer should examine himself before partaking of the bread and cup. The unworthy manner may include the issue of those in verse 21 who ate to capacity while others went hungry but it is in no manner at all restricted to this. Paul deals in verse 28 with issues in the life of individuals that if undealt with will cause God to chastise them. We are told the results of this chastening at Corinth: “For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep” (v30). Death was the end result for some.

So then for anyone to mock those who in obedience to Christ examine their heart before partaking is very serious. Furthermore to say this was created by John Calvin when clearly it is scriptural is again very serious. And to make light of examining the heart with regard to sin and of the serious consequence of neglecting such leading to sickness and death is a clear departure from simple scriptural teaching.

Clearly Viola and Barna choose what to emphasize when dealing with Scripture. They insist on a practice of feasting that is nowhere commanded by Christ. They are confusing the social feasting of believers together, with the table of remembrance instituted by Christ. While Christ and the apostles made much of the cup and bread, these authors make much of a social meal. They take the words “dinner” and “Supper” and emphasize them out of all proportion while at the same time de-emphasizing the words “bread” and “cup.”

In closing I must say that there is one comment with which I agree. "...we regret that that so many churches have lost the focus the first Christians had when they celebrated communion." The teachings in *Pagan Christianity* are actually bringing forth teachings which will cause a loss of the focus which the first believers possessed as they communed together with Christ at His table. Three simple directions are given in these scriptures which all believers are to look in when gathering around the table: i) Backward - to Calvary in remembrance of Christ's Death. ii) Inward - to judge any issue of the heart. iii) Forward – looking to the Coming of the Lord.

And so we see that the breaking of bread is no 'potluck' dinner but a gathering of believers together as the Church to remember Christ, His death and His coming again with the simple symbols of the bread and cup.

