

THE LORD'S SUPPER AND THE CHURCH

I. Introduction

- A. Under what circumstances may a person deviate from God's instructions or pattern?
1. A quick and oversimplified answer would be: *when he has no other choice.*
 - a. When it is *physically or morally impossible* to do what God says, one is not disobedient not to do it.
 - b. God simply does not require people to do what they cannot do.
 - c. For example, one is not required to meet with the church on the first day of the week when he is sick or similarly unable to do so (cf. Acts 27:27).
 - d. Jesus contemplated such situations.
 - 1) Keeping the Sabbath did not disallow one from:
 - a) taking care of one's livestock (Lk. 13:14,15),
 - b) tending to the needs of the sick (Lk. 13:16),
 - c) offering sacrifices in the temple (Matt. 12:5), and
 - d) circumcising a son on the eighth day of his life (Jn. 7:22,23).
 - 2) *The Sabbath commandment did not forbid necessary labor.*
 2. Yet, some have claimed *servicing the greater good* as a determinative factor.
 - a. What this really says is that one may select what is supposedly "the greater good" and do it, even if it means violating another part of God's pattern.
 - b. Of course, this really contradicts the first point in that it says people can choose when deviation from God's instructions is justified.
 - 1) This alternative says that people may choose to do *part* of what God has said even if they are not able to follow the *whole* pattern.
 - 2) *They could choose not to do it at all (since they cannot do it all).*
 - c. Some examples which might not give most Christians any difficulty are:
 - 1) substituting sprinkling or pouring for immersion, and
 - 2) substituting other elements for the Lord's Supper, if those prescribed in the New Testament are not available.
 - d. Yet, if some parts of the New Testament pattern for the Lord's Supper are not available, some think it is all right to proceed with what they have.
 - 1) Indeed, there is inconsistency about this, since they may not insist on some parts of the pattern but do insist on others, such as:
 - a) grape juice and unleavened bread, and
 - b) partaking of the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week.
 - 2) This inconsistency extends to the *setting* for the Lord's Supper.
 - a) Some eat of it when they cannot partake of it with a church.
 - b) Some of these variations of this are partaking of it:
 - i. *in* the church but not *with* the church,
 - ii. *in* the *meetinghouse* but not *in* the *church*,
 - iii. when they can be served by members of the church, perhaps in their homes or hospital rooms, or
 - iv. when they are *traveling* but not when they are *sick* (even though their sickness does not prevent them from partaking).

- B. Before examining the setting, there are a couple of helpful principles to bear in mind.
1. *God does not want approximate obedience* (Judg. 17:5,13 cf. 2 Chr. 13:9-12).
 2. *If one cannot do what God says, he should not do it at all* (1 Sam. 10:8; 13:8-14).
 - a. Under tremendous pressure (13:7,8,12), Saul offered a sacrifice at Gilgal instead of waiting for Samuel, who then rebuked him.
 - b. Brethren in the 19th-century thought the demands of evangelism justified the displacement of the church with missionary societies (cf. 1 Tim. 3:15).

II. The Setting for the Lord's Supper: the (Assembly of) a Local Church

- A. Scripture shows a consistent pattern of local churches as a setting for the Lord's Supper.
1. This is shown in Paul's correction of its two abuses at Corinth (1 Cor. 11:17-34).
 - a. The Corinthians had turned the Lord's Supper into a common meal, but Paul told them to eat their meals at home (vss. 20-22,34).
 - b. The Corinthians were not eating the Lord's Supper together, but Paul told them to "wait for one another" (vs. 33).
 - 1) This infers that they were to get the Lord's Supper together.
 - a) Paul said, "... One is hungry and another is drunk" (vs. 21).
 - i. He did not say, "One is absent and another is drunk."
 - ii. The "hungry" were there but ate not with the others.
 - iii. "Waiting" for brethren (to arrive) but not eating with them would not have corrected the problem cited.
 - b) Obedience to this instruction does not allow some members of the assembly to eat the Lord's Supper while others do not.
 - 2) Furthermore, the text says "together" four times (vss. 17,18,20,33).
 2. One of the activities in which the Jerusalem church engaged when its members were together was "the breaking of bread" (Acts 2:42-44).
 - a. That this refers to the Lord's Supper is indicated by the fact that:
 - 1) It is listed among other activities of a spiritual nature (vs. 42), and
 - 2) "They were continually devoting themselves" to it.
 - a) This (*proskartereo*) means "to attend or devote oneself to."
 - b) When it is used of disciples, it always refers to spiritual activities (Mk. 3:9; Acts 1:14; 2:42,46; 6:4; 8:13; 10:7; Rom. 12:12; 13:6; Eph. 6:18; Col. 4:2).
 - i. The apostles refused to serve tables in order to be devoted to prayer and the word of God (Acts 6:1-4).
 - ii. It should not be expected that the New Testament would encourage Christians to be as devoted to physical food as to spiritual activities (cf. Rom. 14:17).
 - b. Thus, while the Jerusalem disciples ate their meals together in their homes, they ate the Lord's Supper together in the temple (Acts 2:42,46).
 - 1) The same word, *proskartereo*, identifies *what* spiritual activities they did together (vs. 42) and *where* they engaged in them (vs. 46).
 - 2) They dispersed to their homes to eat meals with one another, but the temple was where they came together (vs. 46; cf. Acts 5:12).
 - 3) This "breaking of bread" to which they devoted themselves in coming together in the temple was not that of common meals.
 - a) That was done "from house to house" (cf. Acts 2:46).
 - b) Thus, the Lord's Supper was the only "breaking of bread" to which they devoted themselves when they came together.
 3. The disciples at Troas also "gathered together to break bread" (Acts 20:7).

- B. Why is the (local) church as the setting for the Lord's Supper so important?
1. It is where God placed it, and this is the only reason the Christian needs.
 2. It fulfills its purpose as a (public) proclamation of Christ's death (1 Cor. 11:26).
 - a. "Proclaim" requires a public announcement (Acts 4:1,2; Phil. 1:15-17).
 - b. Thus, it was to be a *public* memorial, which unbelievers could attend and observe (cf. 1 Cor. 14:22-25), not a *private* one held in an exclusive setting.
 3. It preserves the local church.
 - a. If the Lord's Supper does not require the church to assemble on Sunday to partake of it, then there is nothing which does require them to assemble.
 - 1) Other activities occurred inside, and outside of, the assembly, but the Lord's Supper was the sole activity exclusive to an assembly.
 - 2) Thus, the Lord's Supper requires members of a local church to assemble every Sunday to partake of it.
 - 3) If the Lord's Supper may be eaten outside the church, nothing requires a church to assemble weekly, frequently, or regularly.
 - b. Some may argue that, if it is not possible to eat the Lord's Supper in the assembly of a church, then it may be eaten outside.
 - 1) This reasoning is nowhere articulated in the New Testament.
 - 2) It encourages abuse of the Lord's Supper by an arbitrary and subjective decision as to when it is not possible to eat it in a church.
 - 3) If they can substitute for one part of God's pattern, then why can they not substitute for *any* part, such as the elements or day?
 - a) No middle ground exists on this point in the New Testament.
 - b) Either the New Testament teaches that the Lord's Supper is to be eaten in the local church *or it does not*.
 - i. The New Testament simply does not say or infer that the Lord's Supper may be eaten in another setting.
 - ii. Thus, one who claims that Christians may eat the Lord's Supper *outside* a church when they cannot eat it *with* a church is really saying that they do not have to eat it in the assembly of a church — period.
 - iii. The New Testament simply does not give any alternative, "fall-back," or "provisional" place for the Lord's Supper outside a church assembly.
 - iv. Once a person says that he may partake of the Lord's Supper outside a church, then he may arbitrarily decide not to assemble with a church to partake of the Lord's Supper for any variety of arbitrary reasons.
 - v. *When one does not assemble with a church to eat the Lord's Supper, the biggest problem is that he did not assemble with a church, not that he did not eat the Lord's Supper, and that problem is not resolved by eating it outside a church!*

III. Conclusion

- A. If Christians cannot do what God says, He does not tell them to do "the next best thing."
- B. With God, as in life, it is better not to do something if one cannot do it the right way.
- C. Either a Christian is able to act according to all of God's pattern and does so, or he is excused from acting according to it at all, for God never requires him to do something at the expense of doing it contrary to the way in which He told him to do it.