

THE SETTING FOR THE LORD'S SUPPER

I. Introduction

- A. If one is too sick to go to the church, may, or should, he eat the Lord's Supper at home?
 - 1. It is difficult to imagine a more realistic or critical question for the church.
 - a. Besides sickness, there are many other legitimate causes of absence from the church.
 - b. So, occasions for this question to be raised are quite conceivable or even common.
 - 2. Yet, there is nothing close to a consistent answer to this question among brethren.
 - a. Moreover, there does not even seem to be much of an interest or sense of urgency to study the Scriptures and discern the answer.
 - b. Brethren have been content to drift with the winds of trend, do whatever caprice or convenience suggest at the moment, or yield to some vague sense of propriety.
 - c. Even when questions like this are put to veteran preachers, the response one gets might be not much more than a shrugging of the shoulders.
 - 3. Brethren have taken the Lord's Supper to nursing homes and hospitals, or perhaps even to the homes of the sick, or maybe on camping, fishing, or hunting trips.
 - a. If such practices have fallen out of vogue, new ones have replaced them.
 - b. Brethren might be past portable communion sets and taking the Lord's Supper to the sick or shut-in but not from having studied and reached firm convictions.
- B. Instead, it is the times which have changed.
 - 1. Brethren have become affluent enough to be able to afford foreign travel and ocean cruises which take them to regions where there are no churches and just "brown bag" the Lord's Supper and take it in their hotel rooms or ship cabins.
 - 2. Yet, if the absence of the sick and the travelers is justified, why is the latter required to eat the Lord's Supper but not the former, and how does one finesse such a distinction?

II. All or None

- A. Eating the Lord's Supper (whenever it is done in a manner consistent with the Scriptural pattern) is a command, not a choice.
 - 1. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper by issuing the command, "Do this in remembrance of Me" (1 Cor. 11:23-25, NASB) and revealed by example (Acts 20:7) that it is to be eaten every Sunday, He took its optionality "off the table."
 - 2. Thus, this is to say, if one *may*, then one *must*.
 - 3. The very Scriptures which authorize one to eat the Lord's Supper *require* him to!
- B. Thus, if *anyone* who is unable to meet with a local church but is able to eat the Lord's Supper must still do so, then *everyone* in such circumstances must do so, for the Scriptures simply do not offer any basis for determining why one such person has to eat the Lord's Supper and another does not.
- C. The implications of this conclusion for the conduct of brethren are enormous!
 - 1. Now, it becomes not just a question of whether brethren on a trip or cruise must eat the Lord's Supper, since, if they must eat it, then there is hardly a conceivable reason why those sick at home are not required to eat it.
 - 2. Being absent from the assemblies due to sickness is a common phenomenon, but being too sick to ingest a thumbnail-size piece of matzo or a thimbleful of grape juice is very uncommon.

III. Is the Setting Generic or Specific?

- A. “Is the authority for the setting for the Lord’s Supper *generic* or *specific*?”
 - 1. This is another way of asking, “Must the Lord’s Supper be eaten *in a church*?”
 - 2. If the authority for the setting of the Lord’s Supper is *generic*, then the Scriptures do not specify where the Lord’s Supper is to be eaten and it may be eaten *anywhere*.
- B. Yet, the Scriptures specify the setting for the Lord’s Supper as *an assembly of a church*.
 - 1. *Direct statement or command*
 - a. Paul said that the Lord’s Supper is to be eaten in the church (1 Cor. 11:17-34).
 - 1) He emphasizes this by using, “come together” five times (vss. 17,18,20,33,34) and once (vs. 18) specifically adding “in the church” (KJV) or “as a church.”
 - 2) Paul expected that the members of the church at Corinth would come together to eat the Lord’s Supper as a church rather than eat it privately in their homes.
 - a) In fact, Paul distinguishes between a common meal and the Lord’s Supper by telling the Corinthians, “If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you may not come together for judgment” (vs. 34).
 - b) Thus, a clear distinction is made between eating a common meal, designed to satisfy hunger, which the members of the church may eat apart from one another in their private homes, and the Lord’s Supper, which they are to eat when they “come together” (vs. 33).
 - c) Different suppers for different purposes call for different settings.
 - d) The Lord’s Supper calls for an assembly of the church to eat it, while a common supper calls for a dispersal of the members to their private homes to eat it.
 - b. This is also confirmed by the fact that the members of the Jerusalem church dispersed from their daily assemblies in the temple for worship or teaching into small groups for “breaking bread from house to house” (Acts 2:46).
 - 1) This “breaking [of] bread” is identified as “meals,” or food (*trophē*).
 - 2) That was fine for common meals, but for the Lord’s Supper, they were required to come together “as a church,” or, otherwise, one might well ask, “Why would they not do in the case of the Lord’s Supper as they did in the case of common meals and disperse to their private homes for it?”
 - 2. *Example*
 - a. Luke records “And on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them ...” (Acts 20:7).
 - b. The structure in which the church at Troas met to eat the Lord’s Supper was a building obviously large enough to accommodate the church and members of the public, for it had at least three stories and many lamps (vss. 8,9).
 - 3. *Necessary inference*
 - a. Paul’s command for members to “wait for one another” (vs. 33) inescapably implies that they were to eat the Lord’s Supper together.
 - b. Also, Paul identified the Lord’s Supper as a *proclamation* (vs. 26).
 - 1) That those who eat the Lord’s Supper “proclaim” (*kataggellō*) the Lord’s death in doing so infers that it is “a public pronouncement” (cf. Acts 3:24; 4:2; 13:5,38; 15:36; 16:17,21; 17:3,13,23; 26:23, et. al.).
 - 2) The use of this word for what members of a local church do when they eat the Lord’s Supper shows that God did not intend for the Lord’s Supper to be eaten *privately* but *publicly*, in the context of a local church assembly, which members of the public could enter and observe (cf. 1 Cor. 14:23-25).
 - 3) So, this rules out eating the Lord’s Supper in private, since one cannot so fulfill its purpose to “proclaim” the Lord’s death.

IV. Rationalizing Exceptions

- A. Indeed, brethren would undoubtedly and vigorously oppose an exception in the form of members of a local church choosing to forego weekly assemblies in preference for a meeting of “cells” or families in private homes on most Sundays to eat the Lord’s Supper.
 - 1. Yet, how do the opponents of such a practice actually oppose it while, at the same time, allowing that, under exceptional circumstances, members of a local church may do what they oppose under ordinary circumstances?
 - a. Just what are the circumstances which are so extraordinary as to make a departure from an otherwise inviolable Scriptural pattern permissible?
 - b. In other words, how do they rationalize such an exception from the Scriptures?
 - c. Furthermore, how does one hone such a rationalization to such a fine edge that it requires tourists, travelers, and voyagers to eat the Lord’s Supper outside a local church but somehow does not require the same of the home-bound sick?
 - 2. Some claim that it is all right to choose to absent themselves from an assembly of a church to engage in recreational and leisure activities, such as pleasure-traveling as long as they eat the Lord’s Supper.
 - a. Yet, why should it be thought that God approves of their choosing not to meet with a local church as long as they eat the Lord’s Supper?
 - b. In other words, *if one is justified in not meeting with a local church on Sunday, why is he not justified in not eating the Lord’s Supper?*
- B. Some might claim that there are exceptions to the general rule which requires members to gather with the church for the Lord’s Supper, but this poses two problems.
 - 1. First, they must *defend* exceptions, and, second, they must *identify* exceptions.
 - a. This is to say that they must establish, in principle, that exceptions may be made.
 - b. Furthermore, they must establish which exceptions are acceptable and which ones are not, including why they are acceptable and others are not.
 - 2. They must explain why the home-bound sick do not have to eat the Lord’s Supper but touristic travelers do.
- C. There are a few major problems with this thinking.
 - 1. First, there is no principle in the Bible to the effect that, when something cannot be done entirely according to God’s pattern, one may resort to a substitute which seems to approximate it.
 - a. The Scriptures do not teach that, if Christians are unable to do what God commands, then they are allowed, or required, to craft an alternative to it.
 - b. According to the pattern of the Scriptures, either a Christian assembles with a local church to eat the Lord’s Supper, or he is unable to do so, in which case he is excused both from assembling and from eating the Lord’s Supper.
 - c. There are no explanations or rationalizations in Scripture for making exceptions to the pattern of members of a church assembling to eat the Lord’s Supper.
 - 2. Second, brethren do not really believe and practice this, though they sometimes arbitrarily make an exception in the case of the setting of the Lord’s Supper.
 - 3. Third, substitutions are condemned in the Scriptures in the prohibitions against adding to, or taking from, God’s word (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:6; Rev. 22:18,19).
 - a. Any substitute, by definition, replaces what is specified.
 - b. If grape juice for the Lord’s Supper is not be available, should brethren substitute another fruit juice or, as the Mormons do, simply allow water to suffice?
 - c. If a substitute might be made in the case of the setting of the Lord’s Supper, though the New Testament offers no substitute for the local church as a setting for it, why should the setting be made the sole substitute allowable?

- D. God did sometimes make exceptions to His patterns, though that is just the point: *He was the One who made the exceptions!*
1. Examples:
 - a. He made an exception for the observance of the Passover on the fourteenth day of the *second* month for the one unable to observe it on the prescribed fourteenth day of the *first* month (Num. 9:6-14).
 - b. Likewise, Jesus made an exception to the law prohibiting divorce and remarriage for the one who put away a spouse for adultery (Matt. 19:9).
 2. However, in both of these cases, and others, it is God who made the exception, and no one who truly respects the word of God would think of making exceptions to God's regulations or patterns on his own initiative.
 - a. Yet, this is precisely what those do who think that, if they are unable to eat the Lord's Supper in the prescribed setting with a local church, they are free to make an exception and eat it in a setting of their own choosing.
 - b. What is the point in God prescribing ways or patterns for worshipping and serving Him if people are free to deviate whenever they feel that convenience or necessity allow, or require, it?
 - c. Also, who gets to decide which parts of God's pattern allow exceptions and which circumstances warrant them?
- E. If the reason which supposedly justifies an exception to God's pattern is not specified or inferred in the Scriptures, then no one can say that any exception is wrong because it is unspecified.
1. No one can specify for others when they make unspecified exceptions to God's pattern themselves.
 2. Herein lies the danger in making exceptions on one's own initiative: *he forfeits the right to criticize others for taking the liberty he has assumed.*

V. **"The Church" Ad Hoc**

- A. Some might claim that a group of Christians, who are not a local church, may eat the Lord's Supper, since they approximate a church, at least in eating the Lord's Supper.
- B. Two or more Christians may form a local church, or two or more Christians may assemble for spiritual purposes, such as singing hymns, praying, and Bible study.
1. Yet, assembling for spiritual purposes, in and of itself, does not make the two or more Christians who do so a local church.
 2. When Jesus gave a four-step disciplinary procedure for a brother who sins against another brother (Matt. 18:15-17), He distinguished between a local church, on one hand, and three or four Christians, on the other hand, who gather for a spiritual purpose.
 - a. In the second step in the process, there is the scenario of as many as four brethren (the offender, the offended party, and two witnesses) being gathered together for the spiritual purpose of considering sin and repentance, but none of this makes them a local church.
 - b. The local church is not introduced until the third step in the process (vs. 17).
 - c. This shows, therefore, that a group of Christians gathered together, even for a spiritual purpose, are not, by virtue of that alone, a local church.
 - 1) Some members of a local church, or those from different local churches, might gather in the home of one of them for Bible study or hymn-singing, but that does not make them a local church.
 - 2) A group of Christians, unless they have organized themselves as a local church, are not a local church and, therefore, may not claim themselves to be the equivalent of such for purposes of eating the Lord's Supper.

VI. Saul's Seven Days

- A. When Saul was anointed king of Israel, Samuel instructed him to wait seven days until he came to offer sacrifices at Gilgal (1 Sam.10:8).
- B. Yet, while Saul waited at Gilgal, the Philistines mustered in numbers “like the sand which is on the seashore in abundance” (13:5) to attack the Israelites, and this unnerved the Israelite forces under Saul so much that they started to scatter and hide (13:5-8).
- C. Saul was in a truly desperate situation.
 - 1. If ever there were a set of circumstances which seemed to justify a deviation from God’s arrangement, this was it.
 - 2. In fact, that seems to have been exactly Saul’s reasoning, for, with Samuel a no-show after Saul had waited for him for the prescribed seven days and his forces frittering away in fright before he could even engage his enemy, he felt that he had no choice but to offer the sacrifices and seek God’s blessing before proceeding into battle.
- D. This incident provides a simple answer to questions which might perplex Christians.
 - 1. Samuel did not tell Saul just to go to Gilgal and offer sacrifices.
 - 2. In God’s instructions, there were at least two other elements which Saul apparently considered inconsequential.
 - a. First, Saul was to wait seven full days.
 - b. Second, Samuel was to offer the sacrifices.
 - 3. Instead, Saul did what was to be done in a way it was not to be done.
- E. However, Samuel showed up just as soon as Saul had finished offering the burnt offerings and confronted him with the question, “What have you done? (vs. 11).
 - 1. Saul laid out the best case he could make for his actions.
 - a. His army was scattering, Samuel had not come within the appointed time, the Philistines were massing against him, and he was about to go into battle without having asked the blessing of the Lord.
 - b. Here are necessity, piety, and shifting of blame all rolled into one.
 - 2. In fact, Saul emphatically summed up his defense to Samuel by saying, “So I forced myself and offered the burnt offering” (vs. 12).
 - a. He was saying that circumstances quite literally compelled him to deviate from God’s commandment.
 - b. It is difficult to imagine that a better case could have been argued to justify an exception to what God had said.
- F. Yet, Samuel found none of Saul’s excuses for his exception adequate.
 - 1. Saul received a stinging rebuke, which came with a hefty penalty: “You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God ...” (vs. 13).
 - 2. Thus, for simply offering a sacrifice hours, or even minutes, prematurely under these dire circumstances, Saul lost his kingdom (vs. 14).
- G. This Old Testament story supplies the person who would be a true follower of God with one of the most important and clarifying principles he could apply to his service to God: ***one must follow God’s pattern all the way or not at all!***
 - 1. To obey God partially, or to disobey Him for a “good reason,” is to reject His word.
 - 2. Worship which is conducted in a manner which is contrary to God’s commandments is utterly unacceptable to Him (1 Sam. 15:23,24).
- H. Applications:
 - 1. If members of a local church cannot meet on Sunday to eat the Lord’s Supper, they cannot meet on another day of the week.
 - 2. If members of a local church do not have grape juice or unleavened bread for the Lord’s Supper, they may not use other elements.
 - 3. If members of a local church cannot meet with a church to eat the Lord’s Supper, they may not do so in an alternative setting.

VII. Another Saul's Seven Days

- A. Saul/Paul traveled from Philippi to Troas and there remained seven days (Acts 20:6) and departed on a Monday morning (vss. 7-11).
 - 1. The length of his stay in Troas is especially significant, given that he was in such a hurry to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost that he had the Ephesian elders come to Miletus to meet him so as not to be detained in a stop at Ephesus (vss. 16,17,31).
 - 2. He seems to have arrived at Troas on a Monday, just missing the Sunday assembly.
 - 3. Since an earlier voyage between the same two cities from the opposite direction took only two days (16:11,12) but this time five (20:6), it seems that Paul left Philippi with enough time to get to Troas by Sunday but just failed to do so through no fault of his.
- B. By the time he got to Miletus and sent a messenger to fetch the Ephesian elders there and they arrived, another Sunday would almost certainly have come and gone (vss. 13ff), though there was probably a church at Miletus (cf. Acts 19:10; 2 Tim. 4:20).
- C. Also, it is possible that he could have sailed, between Sundays, from Miletus to Tyre.
 - 1. When he arrived at Tyre, he knew he could get to Caesarea, where there was also a church (Acts 21:7,8), in a couple of days (cf. 27:1-3), and thence overland to Jerusalem in a few more days (cf. 23:31 – 24:1).
 - 2. Thus, he was confident that, by the time he reached Tyre, where there was another church, he could relax his rate of travel and remain seven days (Acts 21:1-4).
- D. Paul three times stayed with brethren seven days (Acts 20:6; 21:4; 28:14).
 - 1. This is the maximal time he had to stay at a place to meet with a church on Sunday.
 - 2. He appears to have exercised some control over his itinerary, so as to be able to be at a port with a church on Sunday (cf. 20:16; 20:1-3; 27:2,6).
- E. A scenario very similar to Paul's five-day Philippi-to-Troas voyage (20:6,7) occurred a few years later in Paul's Malta-to-Puteoli voyage.
 - 1. Again, it appears that a voyage of five-to-seven days brought him to Puteoli, where he stayed with brethren seven days.
 - 2. There is no reference to eating the Lord's Supper with the church in Puteoli, but he might have gained the respect of the centurion in charge of him (27:1-3,9-11,21-26,30-32,42-44), so that, despite being conducted as a prisoner to Rome for trial, he was allowed to accept an invitation of brethren to stay there seven days (28:13,14).
 - 3. Yet, it is in keeping with what came to be something of a pattern with Paul that he stayed seven days at Puteoli, where he certainly would have been assured of spending one Sunday meeting with the church there.
 - a. He spent only three days at Syracuse (vs. 12), where no brethren are mentioned.
 - b. The voyage from Malta might have taken just long enough to cause Paul to miss the Sunday meeting of the church in Puteoli and cause him to decide to accept an invitation to stay there seven days in order to meet with the church on Sunday.
 - c. This explains Luke's care in detailing the time frame of Paul's travels in the latter chapters of Acts and his repeated references to Paul's seven-day stays, which occurred only in places where there were local churches and despite being under some time pressure to continue his journey.
- F. This picture also fits the first-century Greco-Roman world, where Sunday was a workday just like any other day of the week and slaves were a common component of churches, as it explains nighttime, once-a-week assemblies on Sundays (Acts 20:7,8) and why Paul would so relatively often have stayed with brethren for seven days.
- G. It is impossible to imagine a better reason why the Holy Spirit would have inspired Luke to record such details of Paul's travels as where he stopped, the length of his stays, and whether or not a church existed where he stayed.
 - 1. Paul seems to have arranged his travels so as to meet with churches on Sundays.
 - 2. When he could not meet with a church, it was not because he was pursuing pleasure.

VIII. Conclusion

- A. Three considerations make this subject very important.
 - 1. It sets a perilous precedent, when one deems himself to be under sufficient pressure, to think that he may deviate from God's pattern.
 - a. Danger looms whenever anyone, whether out of a sense of piety or not, decides that he may deviate from God's pattern on his own initiative.
 - b. Such decisions are ultimately subjective and arbitrary and make each individual a judge of God's word (Jas. 5:11).
 - 2. It threatens the local church to do so in the case of the setting for the Lord's Supper.
 - a. *It is the Lord's Supper which requires the members of a local church to assemble every first day of the week* (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:17-34).
 - b. Therefore, if it were concluded that an assembly of the local church as a setting for the Lord's Supper is not an *essentiality*, but an *expediency*, then a church is free to choose for its members to assemble to eat the Lord's Supper at something less than a weekly rate and to eat it in another setting, and even alone.
 - 3. It conceals a more fundamental problem: *Christians are subordinating their worship and service to God to worldly interests.*
 - a. When brethren think that, in order to pursue recreation or tourism, they may absent themselves from an assembly of a local church to eat the Lord's Supper if they can supply an alternative, what else can that be but *worldliness*?
 - b. It is disingenuous to claim that necessity of circumstances justifies a departure from God's pattern when that "necessity" is pleasure-seeking which one chooses at the expense of assembling in a local church on Sunday.
 - c. Without realizing it, they have gravitated to the notion that they are so entitled to indulge themselves in the luxuries and pleasures offered by the world that they cannot conceive of it as anything other than an overbearing burden that they must choose between them and the practice of the gospel.
 - 1) If not, here is a solution with which they may test themselves: *to forego pleasure trips which they know will prevent them from meeting with a local church on Sunday.*
 - 2) If they recoil from this as something too much to ask, then they reveal more about themselves than they would like to know.
 - d. Anything which justifies brethren's absenting themselves from the Sunday assembly of a local church justifies them in not eating the Lord's Supper which, according to God's pattern, is reserved solely for that setting.
- B. Thus, the question which ought to concern brethren is, not whether they are justified in not eating the Lord's Supper, if "necessary," outside a local church assembly.
 - 1. Rather, the question is *whether the pursuit of their pleasures justifies them in not meeting with a local church.*
 - 2. *If they are not justified in the latter case, then it will not help them to eat the Lord's Supper!*