

The Lord's Table

By Paul S. Rees, D.D.

"Ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils."—I Corinthians 10:21

There are great moments in history when the words of a man bring so sharply into focus the issues at stake that those words themselves become part of history. That was true, certainly, when Abraham Lincoln, in 1858, made his famous speech on slavery as an issue that divided the North and South. His ringing words, "I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free," have taken their place among the classical quotations of all time.

This, in principle, was the situation that the apostle Paul faced when he wrote his letter to the Corinthian church. Corinth was a city of idols and of idol temples. It was a city of vast corruption.

Here were these Christians, most of whom had been converted from idolatry and its associated evils. As Christians, they attended the Christian love feasts, which ended with the observance of the Lord's Supper—the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the wine.

But as citizens and, I suppose one might add, as ex-idolators, they would attend some of the heathen feasts at the temples.

You are not to do this, warns Paul. An idol, in itself, is nothing. But an idol as a symbol is a great deal—and very wrong. It is the work of sinful human hands turned into an object of worship.

A MYSTICAL SHARING

Paul's argument is this: As the partaking of the bread and wine in the communion service is a mystical sharing in the death and life of Christ, so the joining in heathen festivals is a mystical sharing in the work of Satan that lies behind the system of idolatry. Between these two, Paul insists, there can be no compromise. For the Christian there must be a clean break with idols. "Ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils."

Now, having caught something of the atmosphere of this text, I should like to single out this phrase, "The Lord's table," and dwell on it as helpfully as possible.

Here is the first time that the expression appears in Christian usage. It has, since Paul's day, become universal as one way of referring to the Communion Service.

Our word "table" comes from the Latin "tabula", meaning, quite simply, a board. The word that appears in the Greek New Testament is one from which we get our English word "trapezium," meaning a four-sided plane figure with no sides parallel. Precisely why Paul should have chosen this Greek word is not clear.

SYMBOLIC MEETING PLACE

What is clear is that the structure which holds the elements of bread and wine, whatever its shape or composition, is the symbolic meeting place of the living Christ and His worshiping disciples. It is the place where their spiritual union with Him is reaffirmed and enriched. It is the place where their life of sharing with one another—the sharing of love and joy and gratitude and understanding—is strengthened and deepened.

And now, let me add, it is a place where a thing as ordinary as a board becomes the hallowed means by which Christ vitally meets and spiritually renews His people.

This latter fact has power, it seems to me, to lay hold of our imagination and set it marching to distant and remarkably interesting places. If the meeting we have with our Lord at the communion table is a worthy spiritual

experience, then every table before which we stand or at which we sit becomes "the Lord's table."

For, you see, when the Saviour chose simple material substances like bread and wine and ordained them for perpetual use in the most solemnly spiritual of all Christian festivals, He was doing away with the hard-and-fast difference between "secular" and "sacred," "material" and "spiritual." He was saying, in effect, the spiritual does not repudiate the material; it sanctifies it.

Let us see what this means in terms of the tables that belong to man's common life.

1.

I think, for example, of the table we see in the thousands of shops and stores where we do our buying and selling—the counter. In a land like America the counter is the symbol of the world's most colorful and colossal system of merchandising.

Now let me ask you—buyer or seller: Is that counter the Lord's table? It should be.

Recall the dramatic story of our Lord's cleansing of the temple, as told in John. The high priest and his henchman had a fatly-lucrative "racket" going. Jesus broke it up. "And when he had made a scourge of small cords," says John, "he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and, the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables" (2:15).

CORRUPTED BY GREED

These counters, which might have been holy, were corrupted by greed, exploitation, and crookedness. They were not the Lord's tables. Hence they had to go.

Have you ever heard of Webb City? Don't look on the map. It isn't there. Webb City is not a city. It is a drug store—perhaps the world's most unusual, and certainly one of its most gigantic, drug stores. It is located in St. Petersburg, Florida, and operated by a man whom everybody down there knows as "Doc" Webb. It does in excess of fifteen million dollars worth of business a year. A few years ago one-seventh of that annual volume was off-sale liquor.

Then, one day, the startled citizens of St. Petersburg heard the announcement by "Doc" Webb that he was tossing out the liquor department of his store. When asked why, he said: "I began to follow the bottles and to realize the trouble those bottles could and did cause." He added, "I could not longer accept the responsibility of furnishing the means to make people drunk, to befuddle their brains, perhaps cause them to commit terrible crimes."

What would happen to the counter in your business if you were to dedicate it to the Lord as His table? Do you not think He would see to it that you dealt the right sort of merchandise across the counter—goods that would make life richer, not poorer, that would make people happier, not meaner?

HONEST MEASURE

Do you not think He would call for honest measure, and full weight, and fair prices, and just treatment both of employees and customers?

At our communion service the bread that lies on the table is made of wheat. The breakfast food that some of you sell across the counter of your store is likewise made of wheat. Consider the two. I would not have you degrade the sacramental meaning of the wheat on the communion table, but I would have you upgrade the

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