

IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME”

by D. A. Carson

Several historians have argued that the most contentious four words in all history are “This is My body” (Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24). Lutherans, Catholics, Calvinists, and Zwinglians were sharply divided on the meaning of these words during the Reformation, and the divisions have never been healed. They are deep and lasting because the difference of opinion surpasses these four words to include the structure of theology that undergirds each respective interpretation.

I wish, however, to reflect on the next clause found in two of the four New Testament passages (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24): “Do this in remembrance of Me.” Because the Zwinglian camp focused almost exclusively on “remembering,” and the other camps have reacted by labeling the Zwinglian approach as “minimalist,” these words of Christ on the night He was betrayed have sometimes been ignored, or dismissed in the throes of debate. But whatever the *full* significance of the Lord’s Supper – and certainly the biblical passages show that its significance is multi-faceted – all sides that love the Bible and believe the Gospel must surely agree that “remembering” is at least one component. In fact, “Do this in remembrance of Me” is the only formal imperative in all the New Testament passages that preserve “the words of institution.” So what are Christians being commanded to do? And why?

First, there is a sense in which this command, and the entire rite of the Lord’s Supper, is shocking. Suppose someone saved your life by donating bone marrow without which you would have died, would you have to be told not to forget that person? Yet here is the Lord Jesus, hours from the Cross, giving His followers a simple but compelling corporate rite by which they are to remember what He is about to do for them. By His death He saves them from eternal death; by His death He frees them from the curse, bequeaths His Spirit upon them, and guarantees their bliss in a new heaven and a new earth. And for their part, they must be given a device so that they will not forget.

Our common experience as Christians tells us how wise this provision is. As we meet from week to week, we discover we think about many doctrinal matters: the attributes of God, the history of redemption, the nature and object of faith, the church, heaven and hell, Christology, and so forth. Moral and ethical matters must be thought through and worked out in our lives: speaking truth, living purely, building godly marriages, bearing with one another, sorting out relations between church and state, and much more. I have not mentioned the bitty things: committees, selecting the church carpet, preparing for a Sunday school class of ten- year-old boys, and on and on. Suddenly, we pause to recognize, with shame, that it has been some time since we have emphasized the Cross.

No less tragic, the Cross has not been our focal point in all of the other areas I have just mentioned.

And so in His great wisdom, the Lord Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took bread and wine and said, “Do this in remembrance of Me.” By this “visible word,” He calls the church to remember what, to our shame, we too easily forget.

Second, the rite functions in part in imitation of the Passover celebration. The annual Passover festival was designed to force the people of the old covenant to remember the night the angel of death “passed over” all the homes protected by the blood, ultimately bringing about the release of the Israelites from slavery (Ex. 12). In neither case – Passover or the Lord’s Supper – is the prescribed rite effective in releasing people, whether from slavery or from sin; in both rites, one of the primary functions is to ensure that the people of God will remember what it is that God has done to win their release.

Third, in Paul’s summary of Jesus’ words of institution, the remembering is closely tied to the new covenant. The first “Do this in remembrance of Me” occurs after Jesus breaks the bread; the second occurs after Jesus takes the cup and says, “This cup is the *new covenant in My blood*. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me” (I Cor. 11:25). This suggests we are not to remember Jesus’ death as merely historical information, but in its redemptive and theological context.

Fourth, the remembering has a profound moral function (11:27ff.). How can someone fairly claim he or she is truly remembering the Lord’s death, while nurturing sin in the heart? Such a person is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. That is why believers ought to examine themselves *before* they approach the Lord’s table (11:28). There was a time when believers wrote books with titles like *How to Prepare for Communion* (Philip Henry). That heritage, if not the books, needs to be dusted off, so that we will never be ashamed, nor tumble into profanity, whenever we hear the words:

“Do this in remembrance of Me.”

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