

## PRAYING AT THE LORD'S TABLE

By Dub McClish

### Introduction

Misconceptions of various Biblical concepts are often discernible in the wording of prayers in our public worship. For example, it is not uncommon to hear a brother lead a prayer in which He apparently forgets momentarily that he is addressing God, rather than men. Accordingly, I have heard more than one prayer of in which a brother prayed: "We thank brother so-and-so for his sermon" or "We thank brother so-and-so for leading our singing." He should, rather, thank **God for** these brethren and then, sometime later, express his thanks to the human beings involved.

Biblical misconceptions abound concerning the Lord's supper if the prayers uttered relating to it are any indication (as I believe they are). I invite consideration of the following statements, all of which I have heard at various times (some of them with great frequency) in prayers at the Lord's table.

#### **"May we be worthy to partake of this bread"**

The misconception here apparently relates to 1 Corinthians 11:27. The KJV rendering states: "Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord." Admittedly, this translation, casually read, could lead one to believe that he must possess a personal "worthiness" to partake of the supper. I have even known of some brethren who refused to partake of the Lord's supper on given occasions because they did not consider themselves "worthy" at the time.

However, this understanding misconstrues Paul's meaning. If personal "worthiness" were a condition of partaking of the Lord's supper, none of us could ever partake of it. In spite of our unworthiness, by means of God's grace we have salvation through the blood of Christ, the shedding of which we commemorate in the communion. Paul's emphasis in 1 Cor. 11:27 is not on the

worthiness of the participant, but on the worthiness of the manner in which one participates, remembering the incomparable sacrifice for our sins. The ASV rendering accurately conveys this meaning: “Wherefore whosoever shall eat the bread or drink the cup of the Lord **in an unworthy manner**, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord” (emph. DM).

### **“Bless this bread,...Bless this cup”**

This terminology may be the most frequently repeated of all. Likely these phrases are based upon a misapprehension of the accounts of Matthew and Mark (almost identical) in their descriptions of the institution of the supper (Mat. 26:26; Mark 14:22). In the KJV, the passage in Matthew reads as follows: “And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body.” Here we have the word *blessed*, with the word *it* added by the translators (it is not in the Greek text). The ASV is very similar: “And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and brake it; and he gave to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body.” The principal difference between the two is that the ASV does not add the word *it* after *blessed*. What did Jesus do when he “blessed” or “blessed it” (the bread)?

Note that He did not ask the Father to “bless” the bread, which is what brethren so often do (as they also do for the fruit of the vine) in their prayers at the table. There is no Scriptural precedent for doing so. The Lord did not need to ask any sort of blessing from His Father upon this memorial bread or fruit of the vine. His blessing had been upon that which it memorialized—the body of Christ which was soon to be sacrificed—from before “the foundation of the world” (1 Pet. 1:18–20). To ask God to “bless” the bread or the fruit of the vine implies that these simple memorials the Lord gave us are themselves somehow inadequate for their purpose without a “special blessing” each time. The Scriptures nowhere hint of such. In fact, such wording, whether or not the prayer leader realizes it, smacks of the Roman Catholic practice of “blessing” the “host” (their name for the bread) and their sacramental wine in preparation for the mass so that these (according to their gross transubstantiation error) will become the literal flesh and blood of Christ when ingested.

The question then arises, “If the Lord did not ask the Father to bless the bread, what did He do when He ‘blessed’ concerning it?” One of the often-overlooked rules of hermeneutics is “Do not quit reading too soon.” Matthew 26:27 tells us the meaning of *blessed* in verse 26: “And he took a cup, **and gave thanks**, and gave to them, saying, Drink ye all of it” (emph. DM). Unless Jesus did one thing concerning the bread and something altogether different concerning the cup, when He “blessed” concerning the bread He simply gave thanks for it. However, this conclusion is beyond mere speculation. Luke provides inspired commentary on Matthew 26:26: “And he took bread, and when he had **given thanks**, he brake it, and gave to them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me” (v. 19, emph. DM). Paul adds his inspired voice to Luke’s: “the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed took bread; and when he had **given thanks**, he brake it, and said, This is my body, which is for you: this do in remembrance of me” (1 Cor. 11:23b–24, emph. DM).

That the New Testament uses *blessed* and *gave thanks* interchangeably is likewise evident in the respective accounts of Jesus’ feeding the five thousand and the four thousand (Mat. 14:19; 15:36). The obvious conclusion is that there is neither Scriptural precedent nor authority for asking God to “bless this bread” or “bless this fruit of the vine.” That which is authorized by the example of Jesus “blessing” in connection with the Lord’s supper is thanking our Father for the bread and for the fruit of the vine.

### **Failure to thank God for the bread and the fruit of the vine**

It seems most ironic that so many prayers at the table fail to express thanks for the bread and the cup. This is particularly ironic in that the only example we have of the content of prayers relating to the elements of the Lord’s supper are prayers of thanksgiving for them. Some are so ill-prepared or ill-informed as they pray at the table that their prayers are a distraction from the purpose of the supper. I have heard brethren pray for the sick, for the preacher, for the elders, for the missionaries, for someone who has just been baptized, for civil authorities, and almost everybody and everything

else under the sun at the table, **while omitting the essential ingredient of thanks for the bread and the fruit of the vine.**

All of the above matters are worthy objects of our prayers, but at the Lord's table?—Absolutely not. The purpose of the supper is to take our minds back to the cross (1 Cor. 11:23–29), and the wording of the prayers should not take our minds down other paths, however noble they may be in other settings. Sometimes brethren get so flowery and verbose in their table prayers that they forget the essential element of thanksgiving. Obviously, it is appropriate for prayers at the table to include words designed to remind us of the terrible sacrifice Jesus made for our redemption. However, such wording is not a sufficient substitute for thanksgivings for the elements themselves—as exemplified by the Lord. Any other wording should be in addition to, rather than in place of, our expression of thanks.

#### **“The Lord's supper, which commemorates the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord”**

I do not know the origin of this terminology or concept. Likely, some good brother, in all sincerity (but without sufficient knowledge or perhaps sufficient forethought) first used this verbiage because he thought it sounded good. From whatever source it came, it was not the Bible. As important as all three of these experiences of the Christ were, the Lord's supper relates only to one of them—His death. When He instituted the supper, He implied that His rapidly approaching death was its focal point. Of the bread He said, “This is my body which is given for you” (Luke 22:19). Likewise, of the cup, He told them: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many unto remission of sins” (Mat. 26:28).

Clearly, He had one object in mind for His disciples to remember in this age-lasting breaking of bread—His death. Only in His death did He give His body and pour out His blood. Paul is even more specific in his great treatise on the supper: “For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink the cup, ye proclaim the Lord's death till he come” (1 Cor. 11:26). Note: The Lord's supper is a proclamation of the Lord's **death**, period—not of His “death, burial, and resurrection.” There is simply is no Scriptural

authority for including in its purpose more than the Lord Himself included. Let us banish this frequently repeated, erroneous phrase from our prayers.

**“We thank Thee for Jesus, Who spilled His blood for our sins”**

I am confident that those who speak of the Lord’s outpouring of His blood as “spilling” it intend no disrespect for this ultimate offering. They likely are under the misapprehension that *spill* is a synonym for *pour out*. However, such is not only a misapprehension, but a **gross** misapprehension. The writer of the otherwise eminently Scriptural hymn, “Grace Greater Than Our Sin,” apparently so believed. The song’s first verse has the phrase, in reference to Calvary: “There where the blood of the Lamb was spilt,” and thereby helps to perpetuate the error. One song book editor, realizing the problem with this word, footnoted it, explaining that “Webster” indicates that *spilt* equals *poured out*, but this explanation is misleading at best.

The principal idea in *spilled* or *spilt* is the accidental or unintentional release of a liquid from its container: “To allow a fluid substance, especially in an unintentional way, to run, scatter, or flow over from a container” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language*, p. 715). “To cause or allow accidentally or unintentionally to fall, flow, or run out so as to be lost or wasted” (*Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, p. 842). There was nothing accidental or unintentional about the flowing of Jesus blood, but such is the implication of this term in relation to His offering. Rather, He said of the offering of His blood and the sacrifice of His life: “No one taketh it away from me, but I lay it down of myself” (John 10:18a). I therefore have great difficulty keeping my thoughts where they ought to be when a brother refers to the “spilt blood” of Christ at the table.

**“We thank Thee for Thy table,... Thy body,... Thy blood”**

The foregoing phrases demonstrate confusion concerning the first and second Persons in the Godhead and/or lack of understanding concerning Who we are to address in prayer. In either case, the terminology is unscriptural. First, if the prayer leader is addressing God the Father (which he likely

is), He erroneously attributes to Him the table, body, and blood which belong only to the Son. The Lord's table/supper is just that—Christ the Lord's. The Scriptures never identify this holy table with either the Father or the Holy Spirit, except in an indirect implied sense of their approval of it. Exclusive identity with the Son is eminently appropriate, since its purpose (as earlier documented) is to serve as a memorial to His sacrificial death.

It should go without saying (but one who leads such a prayer obviously needs to hear it said) that God the Father does not have a table, but neither did He ever have either body or blood. Instead, the incarnate Son of God in His body yielded up His blood on the cross. The Father was not on the cross, but the Son— while on the cross—prayed to His Father Who was in Heaven, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). The prayer phrases above at best demonstrate a gross, unscriptural confusion of God the Father and God the Son in the prayer leader's thinking. Second, if the prayer leader should plead that He knows better than to address the aforelisted phrases to the Father and is not doing so, he is still in error. The only one to Whom he could be addressing his prayer is to the Son of God, which the Scriptures nowhere authorize us to do. Rather, they teach that we are to address the Father, through the Mediation of the Son, in our prayers (John 16:23–24; Col. 3:17; 1 Tim. 2:5).

### **Conclusion**

Based on the foregoing Scriptural principles, I suggest simply worded models for prayers at the Lord's table, such as the following:

Dear Father in Heaven, we give thanks for this bread, given by our Savior to represent His body which He willingly gave for us on the cross. As we eat this bread may we let it serve His purpose for it—to remind us of His suffering for us. In His name we pray. Amen.

Dear Heavenly Father, in like manner we thank Thee for this fruit of the vine, which our Lord gave us as a symbol of the blood which He freely offered for our sins on Calvary. As we drink of this memorial cup, may we remember the awful price that He paid for our

redemption, and may we never cease to be grateful for this unspeakable gift. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Misconceptions of the Lord's supper and consequently, misworded prayers at the table, are hardly new phenomena. The late widely traveled and much celebrated evangelist, T.B. Larimore (1843–1929), made the following observations almost a century ago:

So far as my limited observations shows, men make more mistakes at the Lord's table, where they frequently talk and pray, instead of simply giving thanks, as the bible authorized, than anywhere else in the service of the Lord.

The misconceptions discussed above are the most common ones in my experience. Doubtless, there are more.

**[NOTE:** This MS was originally written for my "Editor's Clippings" column, and was published as such in the July 2005 edition of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, of which I was Editor at the time.]