

A Fresh Look At Acts 20:7

Some Introductory Comments

1. Jesus, after they had supped in the upper room, set in place the Lord's Supper as a memorial to His death for the sins of the world (Mt 26:26-29). Speaking to his Apostles shortly before his death, he said of the unleavened bread, "Take, eat; this is my body" (26) and of the cup "drink from it, all of you. "For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (27-28).
2. When the apostles taught the Jerusalem church the right way, the breaking of bread was included (Ac 2:42). The Lord revealed this same memorial to Paul, who taught it to all the churches (1 Cor 11:23-26; 4:17). In none of these instructions, nor throughout the New Testament, is the when and frequency clearly stipulated by direct command or approved example.
3. Consequently, "Christians" of later times are left scratching their heads endeavouring to find an answer to these questions.
4. Many commemorate Christ's death and resurrection on a yearly basis at Easter, approximately the time of year when Jesus was crucified. Others remember His death monthly, on the first day of the week, a different day of the week or some other permutation.
5. The question I want to consider is, "What is the Lord's will in the matter?" Does He specify a day and frequency or is this left to the discretion of His people? Despite this apparent ambiguity, His will is laid out for us in the Bible and so it is to the Bible that we must turn for the answer.

I. Acts 20:7 - The Starting Point.

- A. Typically we will often begin our consideration of the issue by turning to this passage. This is reasonable because it is the only verse that provides a specific time when the Lord's Supper was eaten.
- B. A re-assessment of the emphasis of the verse.
 1. When dealing with the meaning of this verse we typically spend a lot of time discussing the significance of the first day of the week in the text and the meaning of the breaking of bread, but Luke's emphasis does not lie here.
 2. The passage is simply giving us a time marker for when something else happened – Eutychus was raised from the dead (10); it is this wonderful miracle that the author wanted to tell us about. Thus, the fact that it took place on the first day of the week is incidental to the main point.
 3. It is sometimes argued that this passage indicates that the Troas brethren's practice of breaking bread on the first day establishes a pattern. Not so, more than one instance of an occurrence must be present for a pattern to exist.
 - a. The fact that it is an Incidental clause makes the case for weekly, first day observance of the Lord's Supper even stronger. It was a normal, common/regular practice of the church that did not have to be explained to anybody.
 - b. This is to be contrasted with Scriptural texts which did need explanation because the author anticipated that his readers might not know the background; they needed to be told. Note two examples from John and then the clearest from Mark.
 - 1) Jesus said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn 2:19). but, explained John, He was speaking of His body (21).
 - 2) Jesus said: "He who believes in Me... out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" (Jn 7:38), which was explained as being the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive (39).
 - 3) Explanation concerning the traditions of the Pharisees (Mk 7:1-5).

II. The Argumentation That Brings Us To God's Will Regarding Time And Frequency.

A. Evidence for the circumstantial clause proposition.

1. "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread..." (7a) is included to set out the circumstance upon which something else was done.
2. First Paul spoke to them (7b). Then notice how one thing is added to another with the conjunction "and."
 - and prolonged his speech until midnight (7c).
 - and there were many lights in the upper chamber where we were gathered together.
 - and there sat in the window a certain young man named Eutychus, borne down with deep sleep;
 - and as Paul discoursed yet longer, being borne down by his sleep he fell down from the third story, and was taken up dead" (8-9 ASV).
3. All of which led up to the miracle described in v. 10.

B. The first day of the week was significant to Christians from the earliest days.

1. Assuming this assertion is correct, this reflects a notable change to what had been usual practise and not something that happened only on one occasion.
 - a. The seventh day was prescribed as the Sabbath as part of the Mosaic Law (Ex 20:10-11).
 - b. It was on that day that Paul was able to reason with the non-Christian Jews in the synagogues (Ac 13:14; 42,44; 15:21 etc).
 - c. "So let no one judge you... regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths," (Col 2:16).

C. How did the first day gain this significance?

1. It is first mentioned in connection with the resurrection (Mt 28:1; Mk 16:2; 9; Lk 24:1; Jn 20:1; 19).
2. Then Ac 20:7 which provides evidence of the disciples Meeting with the approval of a Spirit inspired apostle.

D. The first day was of the utmost importance to Paul.

1. The Troas incident occurred when Paul was travelling from Greece to Jerusalem. He was in a hurry since he was trying to reach Jerusalem by the Day of Pentecost (Ac 20:16).
2. Nevertheless, he waited 7 days in Troas so as to meet with the Troas brethren on the first day (20:6).

E. The purpose of the meeting was to break bread (20:7).

1. It was not a specially called meeting; Paul preached because he was there (7).
2. The Troas brethren were already breaking bread on the 1st day and would have done so whether or not Paul joined them.
3. It is not a passage which explains the first day of the week or the breaking of bread. From this text alone, we would struggle to establish that it is the Lord's supper. It is presented as something that was going on, a customary, regular practice that needed no explanation. It was unnecessary for Luke to fill Theophilus in because he already knew about it.
4. The incidental manner of presentation strengthens the case that this is dealing with a regular, set practice of the disciples and not something that just happened one Sunday.
5. The "breaking of bread" is used in two ways, an ordinary meal and its specialized usage as in 1 Cor 10:16. Which is it in our text?
6. To gather the evidence, let's consider the relationship of the passage with 1 Corinthians, written less than a year before the events of Ac 20:7-12.

- a. The letter was written in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:19-20), his hurried departure likely being occasioned by the uproar in the city (Ac 19:23-40).
- b. A number of points are illustrated by this letter.
 - 1) The emphasis placed on the common practise of churches (4:17; 7:17; 14:33; 14:34; 16:1).
 - 2) Regular first day of the week meetings was part of that pattern (16:1-2)
 - “every week (ESV; ERV; NASV; NIV; RSV)”.
 - There would only be a reason for writing, “let each one of you lay something aside” (16:2), if there had been regular 1st day meetings.

Summary

1. The balance of the NT evidence points to:

- The existence of regular meetings on the first day of the week
- The purpose of these meetings was to break bread
- Collections were taken on these days
- There was a frequency to these meetings i.e., weekly, and that frequency is shown by Ac 20:7
- The fact that the Troas meeting is presented as an incidental event that needs no explanation shows that it was not something that happened because of Paul’s presence; it was a regular occurrence.

2. This brings us to the conclusion that the Lord’s Supper is to be taken weekly on the first day of the week.

3. We can take reassurance from Paul’s closing admonition to Timothy:

“All Scripture [is] given by inspiration of God... that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17).