The Lord’s Supper is a memorial that is sacred to the memory of Jesus Christ. “Do this in remembrance of Me” (I Cor. 11:24). When He was in Bethany, Jesus had indicated that He wanted Mary to be remembered when the gospel was preached. Now in the room where the Supper would be taken, He expressed His desire that He Himself be remembered. He made sure Mary’s loving deed would be commemorated by having her story rehearsed over and over again. He would have His own loving deed commemorated by a symbolic action. It would be repeated often throughout the ages to the end of the world.

The rite of the Supper is not only used to commemorate but, also, to interpret the Lord’s death. It throws important light on the meaning of that solemn event. During His personal ministry, the institution of this symbolic feast was, in fact, the most important contribution Jesus made to the doctrine of the atonement which came by His sacrificing Himself. The Twelve learned from the Supper, more clearly than from any other act or word He performed or spoke, that their Master’s death possessed a redemptive character. By introducing the Supper, Jesus, in essence, said to His disciples: “My approaching passion is not to be thought of simply as a calamity or dark disaster which is happening contrary to the divine purpose or My expectation. It is not a fatal blow which has been inflicted by ungodly men on Me and you, or on the cause which is dear to all of us. It is not even an evil that is overruled for good. Rather, it is an event that fulfills, not frustrates, the purpose of My mission. It will provide blessings to the world. What men mean for evil, God means for good, in order to save many people. On the one hand, the shedding of My blood is the crime of wicked Jews. On the other, it is My own voluntary act. I pour out My blood for a gracious purpose - for the remission of sins. My death will initiate a new dispensation and seal a new testament. It will fulfill the purpose that the Mosaic rituals had, especially the ritual involving the paschal lamb, which is being eaten right now. Not only that, it will take the place of these rituals. I will be the Paschal Lamb of the Israel of God from this time on. At the same time, I will protect my people from death and feed their souls with my crucified humanity as the bread of eternal life.”

These truths are very familiar to us, no matter how new and strange they may have seemed to the disciples. We are used to explaining the Supper by His death, rather than the death by the
Supper. It may be profitable here, however, to reverse the process. Imagine being in the position the Twelve were in. They were witnesses to the institution of a new religious symbol. Try to re-discover, from this symbol, the meaning of the event with which it is now associated. The Supper is intended to foreshadow the significance of His death. Let us, then, take our stand beside this ancient monument and try to read the mysterious inscription on its weather-worn surface.

**In Memory of His Death**

1. First, we immediately perceive that the monument refers to the death of Jesus. It is not simply erected to His memory in general. It is erected especially in memory of His death. All things point forward to what was about to take place on Calvary. The sacramental acts of breaking the bread and pouring out the wine obviously look in that direction. Also, all the words Jesus spoke when He instituted the Supper allude to His death. Both the fact of His death and the way He would die are hinted at when He makes a distinction between His body and His blood: “This is my body...this is My blood.” Body and blood are one in life. They become separate things only in death - and not by every kind of death. He would die in a manner that would involve blood-shedding, such as happens in the case of sacrificial victims. The comments made about the body and the blood point at death even more clearly. Jesus speaks about His body as “given” - as if He would be slain or “broken” (I Cor. 11:24) in sacrifice. He spoke of His blood as “shed.” Finally, the Savior made it clear what He was alluding to when He described the blood that He was about to shed as the blood of a new testament. Where a testament exists, there must also be the death of the testator. And though an ordinary testator may die an ordinary death, the Testator of the new testament must die a sacrificial death. The word *new* implies a reference to the old Jewish covenant which was ratified by the sacrifice of burnt offerings and peace-offerings of oxen. Their blood was sprinkled on the altar and on the people. Moses called it “the blood of the covenant.”

**Jesus’ Greatest Event**

2. The simple fact that the Lord's Supper commemorates especially the Lord’s death implies that His death must have been an event of utmost importance. By instituting a symbolic rite for this purpose, Jesus, in essence, said to His disciples and to us: “Fix your eyes on Calvary. Watch what happens there. That is the greatest event in My earthly history. Other people have had monuments erected to them because they have lived lives that are considered memorable. I want you to erect a monument to Me because I have died. It's not that I want you to forget My life, but I especially want you to remember My death. Commemorate it for its own sake. Don’t do it just because My life has been terminated. Other people are remembered when their birthdays are celebrated. But in My case, it is better to celebrate the day of My death than the day of My birth. My birth into this world was marvelous and momentous. But My exit out of the world by crucifixion is even more marvelous and momentous. No joyful commemoration is needed for My birth. But keep the memory of My death alive through the Holy Supper until I come again.
When you remember it well, you remember all of My earthly history. Out of all the days I have lived on earth, My death is the secret, the consummation, and the crown.”

But why, in a history that was remarkable at every turn, should His death be singled out for remembrance? Did its tragic character win this distinction? Did the Crucified One mean for the Supper named for Him to simply be a dramatic representation of His passion in order to excite our feelings? Was it to elicit a sympathetic tear by renewing the memory of His dying sorrows? If we were to think about His death in this way, we would degrade our Christian feast to the level of the pagan festival of Adonis,

*Whose annual wound in Lebanon allured*  
*The Syrian damsels to lament his fate*  
*In amorous ditties all a summer’s day.*

Or, did Jesus want His people to remember the awful wrong and shameful indignity that was done to the Son of God by the wicked men who crucified Him? Was the Holy Supper instituted in order to brand the world with eternal infamy - a world that knew no better use to make of the Holy One than to nail Him to a tree, a world that felt more kindness even for a robber than for Him? Certainly, the world deserved to be censured. But the Son of Man did not come to condemn sinners but to save them. It was not within His loving nature to erect an enduring monument to His own resentment. He would not dishonor His murderers. The blood of Jesus “speaks better than the blood of Abel” (Heb. 12:24).

Or, did Jesus instruct His followers to always keep it in mind because His death on the cross was, in spite of its indignity and shame, *glorious*? Was it to be a testimony to His invincible faithfulness to the cause of truth and righteousness? Is the festival of the Supper to be regarded as a solemn occasion in the same way that the early church remembered the death of the martyrs? Is the *Coenâ Domini* (“On the Lord’s Supper”) simply the birth of the great Protomartyr (First Martyr)? The Socinians would have us believe this [Note: Socinianism, a forerunner of Unitarianism, was a rationalist movement that was begun by Lelio Sozzini (1525-62). He taught that Jesus was the revelation of God, but was only a man. He also believed that the soul died with the body, except in certain cases of those who persevered in obeying Jesus’ commandments.] The Racovian Catechism replies to the question as to why the Lord wished the memory of His crucifixion to be especially celebrated in His church: “Because of all of Christ’s actions, it was the greatest and most proper to Him. For although the resurrection and exaltation of Christ were far greater, these were acts of God the Father rather than of Christ” (*De Coenâ Domini*, Question 4) [Note: The Racovian Catechism, published in 1605 in Racov, Poland, was the most famous expression of Socinianism.] In other words, His death, above everything else, deserves to be remembered because it was the most important and awe-inspiring act of witness-bearing
on Christ's part to the truth. It was the glorious climax of a noble life of self-sacrificing devotion to the high and dangerous vocation of a prophet.

It is, of course, true that Christ's death was all of this. It is also true that it is worthy to be remembered as an act of martyrdom. But whether Jesus instituted the Holy Supper for the purpose of commemorating His death exclusively, primarily, or even at all, as a martyrdom, is a different question. For this point, we must learn the truth from Christ's own lips. Let's return, then, to the history of the institution to learn His thinking about this matter.

**The Benefits of His Death**

3. Thankfully, the Lord Jesus was particularly clear when He explained which aspect of His death that He wanted to be celebrated. When He distributed the sacramental bread to His disciples, He said, “This is My body, given, or broken, for you” (Luke and Paul). By saying this, He intimated that His death was to be commemorated because of a benefit it provided for the communicant. When He handed the disciples the sacramental cup, He said, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is to be shed on behalf of (you and) many for forgiveness of sins” (Mt. 26:27–28). With these words, He indicated the nature of the benefit He purchased by His death. Therefore, because of this particular benefit, it was worthy to be remembered.

In this creative word about the new dispensation, Jesus represents His death as a sin-offering. He atones for guilt and purchases forgiveness for our moral debt. His blood was to be shed for the remission of sins. In light of this purpose, the blood is called the blood of the new testament. Apparently, it alludes to the prophecy of Jeremiah which contains a promise of a new covenant to be made by God with the house of Israel. This covenant's primary blessing would be the forgiveness of iniquity. It is called new because, unlike the old, it would be a covenant of pure grace. It would be a covenant of promises that is unclogged of legal stipulations. By mentioning His blood and the new covenant together, Jesus teaches that, even though He would annul the old, He would, at the same time, fulfill the old in introducing the new. The new covenant would be ratified by sacrifice like the old one was at Sinai. The remission of sin would be granted after blood-shedding. But in offering the cup to His disciples, the Lord intimates that after His death, there would be no more need for sacrifices. The sin-offering of blood will be converted into a thank-offering of wine, a cup of salvation to be drunk with grateful, joyful hearts by all who through faith in His sacrifice have received the pardon for their sins. Finally, Jesus suggests that the new covenant concerns the many, not the few - not Israel alone, but all nations. It is a gospel which He offers to all sinners.

The cup is a seal of this new covenant. We may drink of this cup with thankfulness and joy because the “new covenant” (new, yet far older than the old) is, in every way, well-ordered and certain. It is well-ordered because surely it is something good and worthy of God that connects the
blessing of pardon with the sacrificial death of Him through whom it comes to us. It is good in the interests of righteousness, because it stipulates that sin will not be pardoned until it has been adequately atoned for by the sacrifice of the sinner's Friend. And it is just and right that there should not be any remission for the unrighteous without the shedding of the Righteous One's blood. Therefore, God's ways serve the interest of divine love. It gives that love a worthy career. It has free reign to display its magnanimous nature by its bearing the burden of the sinful and the miserable. And one more thing. The constitution of the new covenant is admirably adapted to the great practical purpose that is targeted by the plan of redemption - namely, the elevation of a fallen, degraded race out of a state of corruption into a state of holiness. The gospel of forgiveness through Christ's death is the moral power of God to raise all those who believe out of the world's selfishness, hatred, and moral baseness into a heavenly life of devotion, self-sacrifice, patience, and humility. No one should think that what is meant by faith in Christ is simply belief in the *opus operatum* (effective work) of a vicarious death. The power of this kind of faith to elevate is more than questionable. But when faith is taken in its true scriptural sense, then its purifying and ennobling power is beyond all question. True faith does not only imply a belief in a certain transaction (i.e., the death of Christ), or that One endured death for others, but a hearty appreciation for the spirit of the act and for the Doer. “The love of Christ controls us” (II Cor. 5:14); and “I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:20) as a result of such faith.

The Socinian way of salvation is so inferior to this new covenant! In their way, pardon is not dependent on the blood of Jesus. To them, He died as a martyr for righteousness, not as a Redeemer for the unrighteous. They believe when we simply repent, God forgives us by a simple word. Forgiveness did not cost the Forgiver any trouble or sacrifice - only a word, or stroke of the pen in signing a document with these words: “Thus says the Lord.” What an ice-cold transaction! What a cold relationship that is implied between the Deity and His creatures! It is vastly preferable to receive forgiveness that had as its foundation, sacrifice. It costs the Forgiver sorrow, sweat, pain, blood, wounds, and death. It is a forgiveness that comes from a God who, in essence, says: “To save sinners, I will not repeal the law which connects sin with death as its penalty; but I am willing to become the law’s victim for that purpose.” This forgiveness is both an act of righteousness and an act of marvelous love. Even though it appears both rational and generous at first, forgiveness without satisfaction manifests neither God’s righteousness nor His love. A Socinian God who pardons without atonement is destitute of a passionate hatred of sin and of a passionate love for sinners.

Jesus said, “Her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much, but he who is forgiven little, loves little” (Lk. 7:47). It is a deep truth, but there is another that is just as deep: We must feel that our forgiveness has cost the Forgiver much in order to love Him much. True Christians display that passionate devotion to Christ which forms such a contrast to the cold intellectual homage that is given by the Deist to his God. When a Christian thinks about the
tears, agony, bloody sweat, shame, and pain that was endured by the Redeemer, as well as His marred vision, broken heart, pierced side, and His lacerated hands and feet, his heart burns with devoted love. The story of the passion opens all the fountains of his feelings. The via dolorosa (“the road of sadness,” the road Jesus followed on His way to the crucifixion) was the only way Jesus could have ascended the throne of His people's hearts.

The new covenant that was inaugurated by Christ's death is certain as well as orderly. It is reliably sealed by the blood of the Testator. What better guarantee can we have of the good-will of God? “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (Jn. 15:13). “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us” (I Jn. 3:16). Looking at the matter in the light of justice, this covenant is equally certain. God is not unrighteous so that He forgets His Son's labor of love. This is the only way it can be under the moral administration of Jehovah. Can the God of truth break His word? Can the Judge of all the earth allow someone - especially His own Son - to give Himself up out of the purest love, and endure sorrow, pain, and shame for His brothers without receiving the results He desired and were promised to Him - namely, many souls, many lives, many sinners that are saved? Think about it. Imagine holiness suffering for righteousness’ sake and not having the satisfaction of doing something to destroy unrighteousness and to turn people from disobedience to obedience? Imagine love, moved by its very nature and by the obligations of the covenant, laboring for those who are lost and, yet, this love goes unrewarded because of the stubbornness, apathy, or faithlessness of the Governor of the universe. Love's labor would be lost - no one becomes better for it; things remain as they were before: Sinners are not pardoned. They are not delivered from the pit and restored to holiness. No chosen people are brought out of darkness into marvelous light! These kinds of things cannot exist in God's dominions. The work of God is carried on in the interest of Holy Love. It gives love the freedom to bear others' burdens. It makes sure that if she will do so, love will feel the full weight of the burden she takes upon her. But this same love also makes sure that, by an eternal covenant of truth and fairness, that when the burden has been borne, the Burden-bearer will receive His reward in the form He likes best - in souls that have been cleansed, pardoned, sanctified, and led to everlasting glory by Himself as His ransomed brothers or children.

The principle of vicarious merit that teaches we are pardoned simply because Christ died for our sins makes sense in the mind as well as in the heart. Practically, it means there is a reward that is held out to encourage righteousness and love. Jesus carried this reward through His heavy task. Relying on His Father's promise, He endured the cross because He saw the certain joy of saving many people. It is the same principle (in a limited application of it) that stimulates Christians to fill up that which is lacking in the sufferings of their Lord. They know that if they are faithful, they will not live for themselves but will benefit Christ's body, the church, and also the whole world. If this were not true, there would be very little moral faithfulness or love in the world. If the moral government of the universe made it impossible for one person to benefit another
through prayer or loving acts; if it made it impossible for ten good men to be a shield to Sodom in order for the elect to be salt to the earth, people would give up trying to do it. Concern over the well-being of the public would cease, and universal selfishness would become the order of the day. Or, if this state of affairs did not take place, we would only have darkness in a worse form. We would find it impossible to understand how Righteousness crucified could provide no benefit to any living creature. This would be a scandal and a reproach to the work and the character of God. Therefore, if we are going to hold on to our faith in the divine holiness, justice, goodness, and truth, we must believe that the blood of Jesus, without a doubt, secures for us the remission of sins. Likewise, we must believe that the blood of His children is precious in God’s sight and makes the people, among whom it is shed, precious. This is true even though their blood is unable to obtain for sinners the blessing of pardon before the divine tribunal (Christ’s blood alone is capable of providing that service for us, and He rendered it effectually once for all). By God’s appointment, and in many ways, their blood is a source of blessing to a world which is unworthy to count among its inhabitants these people whom it does not know to use except as lambs for the slaughter.

Jesus, the Bread of God

4. The sacrament of the Supper shows that Christ is not simply a Lamb to be slain for a sin-offering, but as a Paschal Lamb to be eaten for spiritual nourishment. “Take, eat; this is My body” (Mt. 26:26). With this command, Jesus taught the Twelve, and through them all Christians, to think of His crucified humanity as the bread of God for the life of their souls. We must eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man spiritually by faith, as we literally eat the bread and drink the wine with our mouths.

By believing Christ is the Bread of Life, we are not to restrict ourselves to the one benefit that is mentioned by Him when He instituted the feast - the remission of sins. We are to think about all of His benefits that cause our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace. Christ is the Bread of Life in all of His offices. As a Prophet, He supplies the bread of divine truth to feed our minds. As a Priest, He furnishes the bread of righteousness to satisfy our troubled consciences. As a King, He presents Himself to us as an object of devotion that will fill our hearts, and whom we may worship without fear of idolatry.

As often as the Lord’s Supper is celebrated, we are invited to contemplate Christ as the food for our souls (in the comprehensive sense). As often as we eat the bread and drink the cup, we declare that Christ has been, and is now, our soul’s food in all of these ways. And as often as we take this Supper with sincerity, we are helped to appropriate Christ as our spiritual food more and more abundantly. The Holy Supper aids our faith even as a symbol or picture (excluding mysticism and magic). Through the eyes, it affects the heart, like poetry and music do through the ears. The mysticism and superstition that have grown around the sacraments over the years are
a witness to their powerful influence over the imagination. People's thoughts and feelings were so deeply moved that they could not believe such power lay in mere symbols. And by the confusion of ideas that naturally came to excited imaginations, they imputed to the sign all the virtues of the things signified. By this means, faith was transferred from Christ the Redeemer, and the Spirit the Sanctifier, to the rite of baptism and the service of the mass. This result demonstrates the need for knowledge and spiritual discernment in order to keep the imagination in check and to prevent the eyes of the understanding from being put out by the dazzling glare of illusion. Considering how thoroughly the eyes of the understanding have been put out by theories about sacramental grace, some people have been tempted to deny that sacraments are even means of grace. They are also prone to think that institutions which have been so terribly abused ought to be allowed to fall into disuse. This is a natural reaction, but an extreme opinion. The sober, true view of the matter is this: The sacraments are means of grace. There is no magic virtue in them or in the priest administering them. But they help faith by the senses and, still more, by the blessing of Christ and the working of His Spirit as the reward of an intelligent, sincere, believing use of them.

This, then, is what we have learned from the monumental stone. The Lord's Supper commemorates the Lord's death. It points out that death is an event of transcendent importance. It sets it forth, truly, as the basis of our hope for the pardon of sin. Finally, it presents Christ the Lord, who died on the Cross, as everything our spirits need for health and salvation - our mystic bread and wine. This rite was instituted by Jesus on the night in which He was betrayed. And He meant for it to be repeated, not only by the Apostles, but by all Christians in all ages until He comes again. We learn this from Paul. And we might have inferred it without any explicit information. An act so original, so impressive, so pregnant with meaning, so helpful to faith, once performed, was virtually an enactment. In performing it, Jesus, in essence, said, “Let this become a great institution, a standing observance in the community to be called by My Name.”

How to Observe the Supper

The meaning of the ordinance determines the spirit in which it should be observed. Christians should sit down at the table in a spirit of humility, thankfulness, and brotherly love. They ought to confess their sins, devoutly thanking God for His covenant of grace and His mercy to them in Christ. They should love Him who loved them, washed them from their sins in His own blood, and who daily feeds their souls with heavenly food. They should give Him all glory and dominion. And they ought to love one another - loving all redeemed people and believers in Jesus as brothers and taking the Supper together as a family meal. While they are doing so, they ought to pray that an increasing number of people may experience the saving efficacy of Christ’s death. This is the way the Apostles and the apostolic church celebrated the Supper at Pentecost after Jesus had ascended into glory. “And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and
sincerity of heart” (Acts 2:46). Would that we could now keep the feast as they kept it then! But how much has to be done before that is possible! The moss of Time must be cleared away from the monumental stone, so that its inscription may once more become distinctly legible. The accumulated debris of a millennium and a half of theological controversies about sacraments must be carted out of sight and mind. The truth as it is in Jesus must be separated from the alloy of human error. The simple rite of the Supper must be divested of the state robes of elaborate ceremonies by which it has been all but stifled. It must be allowed to return to primitive simplicity. These things are devoutly longed for. They will ultimately come - if not on earth, then in that day when the Lord Jesus will drink new wine with His people in the kingdom of His Father.