

GOD'S GRACE FOR THE HUNGRY SOUL

The Bible's Teaching on the Lord's Supper

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INTRODUCTION

All of us want to fully experience God. We want the kind of interaction with God that we enjoy with a friend when we meet them at a coffee shop—seeing his face, hearing his voice, getting immediate reactions to our thoughts, perhaps receiving some tangible assurance about the relationship. The notion of walking by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7) is not an easy one for us.

In the sacraments, especially in the Lord's Supper, our faith does not become sight, but our faith does get expressed in things that we can see and taste and touch. We, in some sense, see and taste God's assuring love. We get a vivid reminder that our relationship with Christ is not the subject of an archaeological research project, but it is something for this very moment. In the Lord's Supper the event of the cross breaks into our world of sight and sound, and we *experience* the benefits of our redemption. As we will see, it is far more than a mere remembrance.

In our modern setting we can hardly imagine the heated debates surrounding the Lord's Supper that led to great division among the Reformers. Some of this debate had to do with how we do *experience* the risen Christ in the Supper. In what ways is he present or not? Are we eating of his flesh or are we not? Thus, to strengthen our understanding of the Lord's Supper we will take a look at some of the differing views of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and the Roman Catholic Church.

The chief part of this article, however, will be a look at Matthew and Paul's discussions of the Lord's Supper—Matthew

our representative for the synoptic tradition and Paul because his discussion in 1 Corinthians 10-11 provides an extensive look at the Lord's Table. At the end of the chapter we will see how the rest of the New Testament speaks of the Lord's Supper, and then provide some practical reflection to assist in our corporate worship. We begin with a look at Matthew 26:17-30, examining it section by section.

THE PASSOVER

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?"¹⁸ He said, "Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'"¹⁹ And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover. (Matt. 26:17-19)

Matthew's record of what has been called The Last Supper opens with two phrases that speak of the same Jewish feast: "the first day of Unleavened Bread" and "the Passover." Throughout the Bible the Passover is the greatest of all the Jewish feasts. We might assume that Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), would surpass it because it brings atonement for the sins of the nation, but it never does. It is the Passover that captures the hearts and minds of the Jewish people more than all other feasts. We can see this in the way that leaders choose to mark times of revival by celebrating the Passover, not the other feasts (e.g., Joshua in Josh. 5:10ff.; Hezekiah in 2 Chron. 30:1ff.).

The roots of the Passover go back to Exodus 12. Following the nine plagues in Egypt God promises a tenth and final plague. This is the death of the firstborn. On a particular night God promises that he will go throughout Egypt "and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on the throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the cattle" (Ex. 11:5).

This judgment of death was an absolute certainty, and yet for the people of God provision was made so that they could escape the judgment. For Israel, the Passover lamb was that provision. They were to put blood from this Passover lamb on "the two doorposts" (Ex. 12:23). It is this blood that brings their redemption: "The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt" (Ex. 12:13).

This first Passover was to be remembered through an annual celebration throughout the history of Israel. They were never to forget this moment of deliverance when the Lord both judged their enemies and accomplished their redemption.

The annual celebration would include specific foods and a message of redemption. The foods were most importantly the "lamb...without blemish, a male a year old" (Ex. 12:5), but also "unleavened bread and bitter herbs" (v. 8). These they were to "eat it in haste" in remembrance of the urgency of that first night (v. 11).

The message of redemption was short but powerful. It was crafted for a day when the Israelites were in the promised land with children who had no remembrance of that first Passover. God commanded them to make known to their children the meaning of this annual feast:

And when you come to the land that the LORD will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this service.²⁶ And when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?'²⁷ you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.'" And the people bowed their heads and worshiped. (Ex. 12:25-27)

Israel was never to forget the connection between their annual feast and when the Lord "passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our

houses." Parents were to keep this gospel message alive in their families. Even from this brief description it is easy to see why Jesus would pick this feast of all feasts to introduce a sacrament for the people of God that would call them back to their moment of deliverance.

The Passover language from Moses highlights also that the Lord's Supper is a *sign and seal*. Such language comes from Romans 4:11 where Paul is speaking of Abraham's circumcision: "He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised."

The "sign" is the physical act, the tangible part of the action or thing. Circumcision is thus a sign. This "sign" becomes a "seal" when we do it by faith. "Seal" in this case means something like a seal of approval that says the item is the genuine article, that it has been examined and is authentic. Thus, the "seal" means a physical or visible thing that implies something invisible.

My wedding ring is a similar kind of "seal." My ring is a physical sign that I have married someone, Anne Sasser (now Baker) to be specific. The ring itself accomplishes nothing. It is only because that ring is matched to my wedding vows given in December of 1995 that the ring has real significance. Because this "sign" is indeed combined with vows I made it is also a "seal" that says, "This man is indeed truly married." The ring does not make me married, it only communicates to others that I am married. In fact, it is really a double statement because it also says that Anne Sasser made vows to me in return.

Like the annual Passovers in Israel, the Lord's Supper is a "sign," a physical and visible act. When it is combined with my faith and God's work of the Spirit in my conversion, then it is also a "seal," an indicator that I am Christ's and he is mine. More specifically it communicates that I have a share in the cross of Christ and the benefits of his work of redemption are mine. It is a seal *toward* God that says, "Christ is my Savior," and it is a seal *from* God that says, "You are my child." John Calvin speaks of this seal from God in this way:

God has received us, once for all, into his family, to hold us not only as servants but as sons. Thereafter, to fulfill the duties of a most excellent Father concerned for his offspring, he undertakes also to nourish us throughout the course of our life. And not content with this alone, he has willed, by giving his pledge, to assure us of this continuing liberality.ⁱ

We are "not only...servants," but we are "sons" of God. Our heavenly Father desires to "nourish us throughout...our life," and thus to "assure us." He does this partially through the Lord's Supper, which he calls the Father's "pledge" to us. Thus, for those already born-again by faith, The Lord's Supper becomes another way that God speaks his promises to our soul. We close this section by citing the Heidelberg Catechism:

Question 79. *Why then doth Christ call the bread "his body", and the cup "his blood," or "the new covenant in his blood"; and Paul the "communion of body and blood of Christ"?*

Answer: *Christ speaks thus, not without great reason, namely, not only thereby to teach us, that as bread and wine support this temporal life, so his crucified body and shed blood are the true meat and drink, whereby our souls are fed to eternal life; (a) but more especially by these visible signs and pledges to assure us, that we are as really partakers of his true body and blood by the operation of the Holy Ghost as we receive by the mouths of our bodies these holy signs in remembrance of him; (b) and that all his sufferings and obedience are as certainly ours, as if we had in our own persons suffered and made satisfaction for our sins to God.ⁱⁱ*

The Passover celebration during the time of Christ evolved from this original meal. The meal would have been

celebrated on the 15th day of the month called Nisan, comparable to March/April in our calendar.ⁱⁱⁱ

The meal would begin with the head of the household offering thanks and praying over the first of four cups of wine: "Blessed art thou, O Lord God, King of the Universe, who hast brought bread from the earth."^{iv} The leader would then explain the unleavened bread, and a course of greens and herbs would follow. It would have been here that Jesus said, "This is my body," over the bread.

Then a boy would ask the meaning of the meal in accordance with Exodus 12:26, and the leader would explain its significance. After this one or two of the Hallel would be sung.

The Hallel is a special set of Psalms used for this night in particular. These included Psalms 113-118. The flow of these Psalms seems particularly appropriate for such an occasion. Psalms 113-114 call us to celebrate the name of the Lord. Psalms 115-116 remind us of different aspects of the Exodus. 116:12-13 even says, "What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD." Psalms 117-118 speak of the love and redemption of the Lord, even including the prophetic word on "the stone that the builders rejected" that became "the cornerstone" (v. 22); and, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!" (v. 26).

After the psalm (or two) is sung the second cup of wine would have been drunk and then the main course eaten (the Passover lamb). A third cup of wine would then follow, the so-called "cup of blessing." This blessing would be, "Blessed art thou, O Lord God, King of the Universe, who bringeth forth fruit from the vine." Hughes Old tells us that the "blessing goes on to mention the covenant with Abraham and the gift of the promised land. It gives thanks for the kingdom of David and God's covenant with David."^v Likely here would have been when Jesus said, "This is my blood," over the wine. At this point the rest of the Hallel would have been sung and a fourth cup of wine drunk.

It is clear that this meal was lengthy and involved significant preparation, though not elements difficult to obtain or afford. This is what would have been in view when the disciples "prepared the Passover" (Matt. 26:19).

THE BREAD AND ITS CONTROVERSY

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." (26:26)

We come now to the central part of the Lord's Supper, the bread and the wine, where Jesus calls us to turn from the Passover to his coming crucifixion—our redemption. The "bread" that Jesus takes is likely the ceremonial unleavened bread used at every Passover meal. As we said above, it seems likely this statement by Jesus would have occurred after the first cup of wine and its accompanying blessing (note that "after blessing it" Jesus "broke" the bread). Now instead of the leader of the supper using the bread to look back at the Egyptian Exodus, Jesus is looking ahead to his death, something made more specific in the longer version of Luke: "This is my body, which is given for you" (22:19).

It is at this point that we need to touch on the controversies that have surrounded these texts. The sentences that have produced the debate are, "This is my body," and, "This is my blood of the covenant" (v. 28). We can even say more precisely that the history of the church has been profoundly affected by the word "is" in these two sentences.

The three main views on these sentences are the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran, and the Zwinglian. Most denominations today align themselves with the Zwinglian view, but of course, the number of Roman Catholics and Lutherans in the world is significant.

The Roman Catholic view holds that when Jesus says, "This is my body," when speaking of the bread that he meant the bread was literally, physically, actually his "body." It is as concrete as if I lift up my laptop to you and say, "This is my laptop." In all subsequent celebrations of the Lord's Supper they would argue that this holds true as well. Thus, the bread itself actually changes in substance with the celebration of the Lord's Supper—thus the term *transubstantiation*—so that the priest in our contemporary setting can also say, "This is the body of Christ," and it is literally the case. Their view did not originate overnight

in the 4th century, but was a step-by-step loss of the original sense of the Lord's Supper and more importantly, the finished work of the cross. The Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck says, "Gradually the difference between the Old and the New Testament dispensation was lost. The gathering place was changed into a temple, the minister became a priest, the Lord's Supper a sacrifice, and the table an altar."^{vi}

Martin Luther originally held the view that the bread and wine were "signs and pledges of the forgiveness of sins secured by Christ's death and received by faith,"^{vii} but as the Reformation scuffles continued about the Lord's Supper he changed. Eventually he would hold that "the body of Christ...is realistically and substantially present in, with, and under [the elements of the] Lord's Super. He saw this as being analogous to the presence of Christ's divine nature in his human nature and as heat is or can be present in iron."^{viii} His view, termed *consubstantiation*, was captured in the 1530 Augsburg Confession:

The Tenth Article has been approved, in which we confess that we believe, that in the Lord's Supper the body and blood of Christ are truly and substantially present, and are truly tendered, with those things which are seen, bread and wine, to those who receive the Sacrament.^{ix}

Despite the number of adherents to these two positions, the Roman Catholic and the Lutheran views must be rejected because *they violate the doctrine of Christ*. The apostle Peter tells us clearly *where* Christ is: "Jesus Christ...has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him" (1 Peter 3:21, 22). He is somewhere right now, but that somewhere is not in the celebrations of the Lord's Supper around the globe. He is, in fact, "at the right hand of God." Further, the Bible is clear that from this location he will come again. He will descend in all of his radiant glory to establish God's kingdom on earth at the consummation (Rev. 19:11ff.; etc.).

Second we consider how Christ is indeed present with us. Passages like Matthew 28:20 remind us of Christ's *omnipresence*: "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Thus, we must affirm Christ's omnipresence through the Holy Spirit even as we affirm his bodily presence "at the right hand of God." He is with us and even in us as the people of God, but this is not how Roman Catholics and Lutherans affirm his presence in the Supper. Instead they are arguing for his *physical* presence. That is why their views must be rejected as unsupportable by the New Testament.

The third dominant view of the Lord's Supper had an early defender in Ulrich Zwingli. He held that Christ was speaking figuratively when he said, "This is my body," and, "This is my blood." The bread and wine remain bread and wine in every way before, during, and after the Lord's Supper. Christ is present by his Spirit, but remains "at the right hand of God" physically. Zwingli said that "To eat the body of Christ spiritually is nothing other than to rest, in one's spirit and mind, in the compassion and goodness of God through Christ."^x Therefore, as Bavinck says,

In the Lord's Supper, accordingly, we confess our faith and express what Christ continually means to us by faith and what we enjoy of him. And we do this in remembrance of Christ, to proclaim and give thanks for his benefits.^{xi}

Most Presbyterian and Baptist confessions and theology are represented by this view, often called the *memorial* view of the Lord's Supper.

The essence of this view is that when we eat physically of the bread and drink the cup we are feasting on Christ by faith. While he remains bodily in heaven we are eating and drinking by faith and receiving him internally by means of the Holy Spirit. There is therefore a real effect on us when we "partake of Christ through faith" by eating the Lord's Supper, but it is not because of any physical presence of Christ. It is instead a confession of "our faith" and something we do "in remembrance of Christ, to proclaim and give thanks for his benefits."

Thus, as with singing worship songs, hearing the Word of God preached, or praying, when we consider in true faith the crucifixion and redemption of our Savior, our souls and minds can "rest...in the compassion and goodness of Christ." That is the great and special benefit of the Lord's Supper. As Wayne Grudem says, "Today most Protestants would say, in addition to the fact that the bread and wine symbolize the body and blood of Christ, that Christ is also *spiritually present* in a special way as we partake of the bread and wine."^{xii} Because he is "spiritually present in a special way," we celebrate the Lord's Supper in faith, joy, gratitude, and worship. The Westminster Confession calls it a "commemoration of that one offering of Himself" (29.2) and says that

worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally but spiritually, receive, and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of His death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward sense (29:7).

The language is difficult, but the point is that just as the elements are physical before our "outward" senses, so is the body and blood of Christ "really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers" in the Supper.

THE WINE

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you,²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matt. 26:27-29)

After Jesus and the disciples had drunk the second cup of wine and eaten the main course (lamb, herbs), they would have drunk the cup of blessing. It seems most likely that here is where Jesus would have said, "This is my blood."

Our familiarity with Jesus' statement might rob us of some of the dramatic impact it would have had on these pious Jews. The notion of drinking blood, as Jesus is commanding here even if symbolically, would have been deeply offensive to a Jewish audience. Pagans and cannibals had their own tradition with this practice, but certainly not Jews.

The idea would have been unthinkable to a Jew, for whom the consumption of any blood was strictly forbidden. Yet now the disciples, who have just been invited to "eat Jesus' body," are also invited to "drink Jesus' blood." Long familiarity with Eucharistic language has blunted the profoundly shocking nature of this imagery, which conjures up ideas of both human sacrifice and cannibalism, as well as overriding the Mosaic taboo on consuming blood.^{xiii}

Matthew records that they drank this cup only after Jesus "had given thanks." The word for "giving thanks" is from *eucharisteō*, and this is the reason the Lord's Supper is called the *Eucharist* in many traditions (Anglican, etc.). Of course, calling it a *Eucharist* does not mean that the important element is Jesus' giving thanks, but that central to the Lord's Supper is *our giving thanks* for this greatest of all gifts given to us. If we are to give thanks "in all things" (1 Thess. 5:18) and "for all things" (Eph.

5:20), then surely we are to give thanks "to God for his inexpressible gift" (2 Cor. 9:15).

Two things are said here that highlight the significance of Jesus' blood. Jesus first calls it, "my blood of the covenant." It is "the new covenant" of Jeremiah 31:31-34 that is in view here. Just as the covenant at Mt. Sinai (the old covenant under Moses) was inaugurated by Moses sprinkling blood "on the people" (Ex. 24:8), so the new covenant would begin only with the offering of Jesus' blood. For Jesus to speak of this covenant means that all the great promises contained in the new covenant would begin once his redemption was offered (his death, burial, resurrection, ascension, sending of the Spirit). God's law is on our hearts, we possess a true knowledge of him, and our sins are completely, eternally forgiven. All of this is communicated in Jesus saying, "This is my blood of the covenant."

The second statement regarding his blood that Jesus makes tells us that it is "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 28). R. T. France explains why it is significant that Jesus says "for many" in this description:

"Poured out for many" recalls the 'many' who are repeatedly referred to in Isa. 53:11-12 as the beneficiaries of the suffering and death of the servant of God, an allusion already familiar to us from 20:28, where again it was specifically linked to the purpose of Jesus' death; here the Isa. 53 allusion is further suggested by the verb 'poured out,' which is used in Isa. 53:12 of the servant 'pouring out his life to death.'"^{xiv}

In other words, to say, "poured out for many," is a shorthand way of saying, "I am the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 who is offering myself to achieve all that is promised there." Isaiah 53 vividly presents the Substitute bearing our sins as a guilt offering, a sacrifice that would "make many to be accounted righteous" (v. 11) as he bears their sins and intercedes "for the transgressors" (v. 12).

Jesus finishes his sentence by making his accomplishment clear: "the forgiveness of sins." What does Jesus accomplish by his sacrifice of atonement? "The forgiveness of sins." The sins that separate us from the Lord, wreck all of our relationships, darken our minds and hearts, and could potentially build up for us an eternity of judgment are "forgiven" because of the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Without his blood there is no forgiveness of sins. Without the sacrifice of Christ we would all die in our sins without any hope for redemption. All forgiveness in the Old Testament anticipates the work of Christ, and all forgiveness in the New Testament is grounded in the work of Christ: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1:7).

Thus, in this single statement are brought together three strands of OT teaching: the covenant at Sinai (Ex. 24:8), the promise of a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34), and the substitutionary atonement of the Suffering Servant (Isa. 53). All of these gloriously unite at the cross of Christ where Jesus sheds his own blood to inaugurate the new covenant and bring the definitive forgiveness of sins. All of these unite in this simple act of drinking the cup of the Lord.

THE KINGDOM AND THE DEPARTURE

"I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. (26:29-30)

The final statement by Jesus takes the near-term of the cross and extends our gaze far ahead. He looks to "that day" when all is fulfilled and Jesus and his people enjoy "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9). Before that time Jesus will not drink with his disciples. Surely they could not have discerned how true was his meaning. Jesus was confirming that he had reached the end of his incarnate ministry as the un-glorified Christ. At his death and resurrection he would be transformed into the incarnate Christ who is also glorified. Yet, that was no consummation. The

consummation was far ahead—humanly speaking, of course. Thus, while we have our eyes on the cross at the Lord's Supper, there is in it an anticipation of "that day" when all of us shall celebrate with Jesus "in my Father's kingdom."

As the meal is now complete and the instruction has been given, "they...sung a hymn." Likely they completed the remainder of the Hallel. One can even imagine Jesus singing Psalm 118:

*The stone that the builders rejected
Has become the cornerstone.
This is the LORD's doing;
It is marvelous in our eyes. (vv. 22-23)*

Leaving the room where the Passover was held they journey to the Mount of Olives where Jesus would agonize in prayer to his Father and then be arrested. The night would not end, however, until he had already been tried by the Jewish leaders and found guilty of the capital crime of blasphemy. What Jesus anticipated and explained in the Lord's Supper would thus come to pass within twenty-four hours.

This concludes Matthew's presentation of the Lord's Supper. To give us a clear picture of the Lord's Supper it seemed best to work through a single account and offer reflections upon it. Now, however, we need to see what the rest of the New Testament reveals about the Lord's Supper. We will begin with Paul's words to the Corinthians because outside of the synoptics this is the most significant statement about the Lord's Supper made in the New Testament.

1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-22; 11:17-34

1 Corinthians 10 and 11 add to our view of the Lord's Supper. Paul's speaks in 1 Corinthians 10 of various aspects of meat sacrificed to false gods. Paul sees temptations all around the issue and wants to help the Corinthians navigate these treacherous waters. There are both freedoms and restrictions, with freedoms dominating the end of the chapter (10:23-31) and restrictions the beginning. It is the first part of the chapter (10:1-22) that speaks of the Lord's Supper.

In these verses Paul is arguing against a specific practice in the Corinthian church. Apparently, many were eating in pagan temples, perhaps not for religious reasons but for social ones. Either way, Paul sees this as dangerous and sinful, but why? The key is his notion of *participation*. That is, when they eat and drink at pagan temples there is a sense in which they are "participants with demons" (v. 20). The Greek word for "participation" throughout the passage is *koinōnia*, a word that is often "fellowship" (Acts 2:42) or "partnership" (Phil. 1:5). Thus, to eat or drink at a pagan temple brings us into a kind of *fellowship* or *partnership* with those demons. In this way we are "participants with demons" (v. 20).

We are instead to reserve such ceremonial/religious eating and drinking for the Lord's Supper. In the Lord's Supper we drink as "a participation in the blood of Christ," and we eat as "a participation in the body of Christ" (v. 16). This is like "the people of Israel" where "those who eat the sacrifices" are "participants in the altar" (v. 18). Paul then makes the statement to which the whole chapter is leading: "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons" (v. 21).

The vividness of the participation language adds a critical dimension to our understanding of the Lord's Supper. It means that while it is right to highlight the "remembrance" component of the Supper (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24-25), we must not reduce this remembering to a mere act of our minds. I can "remember" a high school math class I once took, but to "participate" in a math class today would be a whole other matter! By faith exercised in the Supper we are once again "participating" in the glorious covenant of grace that Christ accomplished through his suffering. The forgiveness of sins and knowledge of God that the covenant established I experience afresh as I participate in the body and blood of Christ.

SACRAMENT, SIGN, AND SEAL

Such "participation" is hard to fully understand. In theological studies it touches on the concept of a "sacrament," and especially the "objectivity of the sacraments." That is, in what way do the

bread and wine actually (objectively) communicate grace? Is it entirely objective and so indifferent to whether I exercise my faith or not? (the Roman Catholic view). Or is it no different from any other moment when I exercise my faith in the person and work of Christ and so receive his benefits? (purely memorial view).

The "participation" language of 1 Corinthians 10 pushes us beyond a purely memorial view and says that grace is imparted in the elements (bread and wine, bread and juice). Yet, just as eating the manna in the wilderness and walking through the Red Sea were to be done with a deep awareness of God's provision through it all (1 Cor. 10:1-5), so our eating is to be a physical act done *in faith*. The faith takes the physical act and turns it into a means of grace.

Herman Bavinck uses the analogy of the Word of God.^{xv} When the Word of God is preached, that physical act of communicating the truth of Scripture accomplishes nothing in a heart unless the Holy Spirit is active in that heart and faith is being exercised by that person. Apart from God's activity and the presence of faith, the preaching of the Word is an ineffective and purely physical (i.e., not spiritual) action.

Thus, it is the activity of God upon the individual and the faith exercised by that individual that make the Lord's Supper accomplish anything at all. When these are present the Lord's Supper becomes a powerful way that we experience the blessings of the cross of Christ—in a way akin to our fresh experience of the same benefits when we respond to the Word preached:

In the Word, Christ is truly and essentially offered and granted to everyone who believes. And he is just as really communicated to believers in the sacrament. The sacrament grants the same full Christ as the Word and in the same manner, that is, a spiritual manner by faith, even though the means differ, one being audible and the other visible.^{xvi}

All of this means that real grace is imparted through the Lord's Supper, but *only* when it is matched to faith in the recipient.

Apart from such faith the Supper does not work in the heart of the individual worshiper.

1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-34

As Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians continues in 11:17-34 he returns to the topic of the Lord's Supper in a much more direct manner. While there is much overlap here with what we have already seen, he also adds several new elements.

First, the Lord's Supper is to be a picture of the unity of an entire local church. He speaks of their divisions "when you come together" (vv. 17-18). This verb, "come together," is used extensively throughout this part of 1 Corinthians and nowhere else in the New Testament outside of the gospels and Acts (23 occurrences in the gospels and Acts). Yet, here we find it seven times (11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34; 14:23, 26).

This demonstrates first *when* the Lord's Supper occurs: it occurs when the church *came together*. We see, then, that the ceremony is one practiced by the whole church together, not being done in small group settings or in ad-hoc situations.

The use of this verb teaches us second what the Lord's Supper *means*: it is a picture of the church *coming together*, its unity as the body of Christ. Paul said in 10:17, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." Thus, the unity of the church is to be communicated in the practice of the Lord's Supper. That is why their divisions virtually eliminated the significance of the Lord's Supper: "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat" (11:20). Unity in the church and the Lord's Supper are to be intimately connected.

Second, Paul speaks of the Supper as a "meal" (v. 21). In addressing the class distinctions appearing in the Supper, he gives us a hint about how it was originally practiced. At the end of the chapter he will tell everyone to "eat at home" if you are hungry so that you will be able to wait for all to arrive at the Supper (11:33-34). This last comment helps us see that the early practice of the Lord's Supper involved much more than a token amount of bread. In fact, so much food is apparently eaten at these gatherings that to miss it is to go "hungry."

Third, Paul continues the tradition established by Jesus at the Last Supper (11:23-26). In this paragraph Paul reminds the Corinthians of what he "delivered" to them, a tradition he "received from the Lord" (v. 23). His verses read closest to Luke 22:19-20. Perhaps it was through Luke himself that Paul received this tradition, for Luke traveled with Paul extensively (e.g., Acts 27:1).

Fourth, the Lord's Supper is proclaiming "the Lord's death until he comes" (11:26). As in the synoptics that mention the coming kingdom of the Lord, so Paul sees in the Lord's Supper an eschatological hope. We "do this in remembrance" of the Lord's death, but only "until he comes." After Christ returns we will remember his death, but not through the Lord's Supper. It is a rite that we practice in this epoch, one where we both cling to the cross in the past and anticipate his return in the future. The Lord's Supper does both.

Fifth, the Lord's Supper must not be eaten "in an unworthy manner" or we risk experiencing the discipline of the Lord (11:27-32). The elevation of the cross of Christ that happens in the Lord's Supper has implications, and one of these is that we must eat it in a worthy manner. Anyone who does not "will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord" (v. 27). It would appear that the apostle sees the divisiveness of the Corinthians as utterly inconsistent with the Lord's Supper. One cannot speak of the crucified body of Christ with such a poor view of the church as "the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:27). The Supper is meant to communicate both our union with Christ and our unity as his people. When all we bring is disunity to the Supper, we are not "discerning the body" (11:29) and we therefore drink "judgment" on ourselves. Paul says this is why some are experiencing the physical discipline of the Lord: "Many...are weak and ill, and some have died" (v. 30).

SUMMARY ON THE LORD'S SUPPER

Because this discussion has been so extensive it will help to now offer a summary of what we covered. Any one of these points could provide an excellent focus for a given celebration of the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper connects us to the Passover of the Old Testament (1 Cor. 5:7; Mark 14:12ff.; Luke 22:7ff.; Ex. 12). Jesus redefines the Passover as he leads the disciples through this meal, but it is significant that he chooses this particular rite to be continued in this new manner. In the lamb slaughtered to save the Israelites from death (Ex. 12:7-13) we find a vivid picture of "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

The Lord's Supper highlights Jesus inaugurating the new covenant for us through his death (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; Jer. 31:31-34). As blood was sprinkled to inaugurate the old covenant (Ex. 24:8), so blood is shed to inaugurate the new covenant, only this time it was the blood of God's own Son. The new covenant means a true knowledge of God and true forgiveness of sin.

The Lord's Supper reminds us that Jesus is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 (Matt. 26:28; Isa. 53:11-12). Jesus saying that his blood is offered "for many" connects us to the "many...accounted righteous" in Isaiah 53:11 through laying on him "the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6).

The Lord's Supper confirms that the people of God are to remain gospel-centered (1 Cor. 2:2; 2 Tim. 3:8; 1 Cor. 11:26). The Lord's Supper is to be practiced until Christ returns, and thus the people of God are never to lose sight of the cross in their lives and corporate worship.

The Lord's Supper is an emphatic statement that our sins have been forgiven (Matt. 26:28; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:22). Implied in our discussion above is the sense that when we celebrate the Lord's Supper we have a profound and powerful demonstration that our sins have been forgiven. This would make songs of joy entirely appropriate after we partake of the elements.

We are to bring both sobriety and celebration to the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:26). There is a dual emphasis in this ceremony, for it highlights both the reality of our sin which required the death of Christ, and the certainty of our forgiveness and sonship which was purchased eternally by that same death.

The Lord's Supper is to be a corporate event (1 Cor. 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34). It would appear from 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 that we are to practice this rite when the church "comes together," and presumably this means the entire church. This is

partly because the Lord's Supper symbolizes not just our salvation in Christ, but also the unity that we possess as "the body of Christ."

We are to eat the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner (1 Cor. 11:27ff.). The key element to bring to the Table is faith. We are never to eat and drink without an active faith that once again rests in the sacrifice of Christ and once again recalls his merciful grace poured out for us. Whether this faith feels conviction over sin or deeper joy in Christ's forgiveness or more determination to be unified with our Christian brothers and sisters will depend on our situation. Faith can express itself in any number of ways that mark our eating and drinking as "worthy."

We are actually "participating" in Christ's death when we eat and drink, not simply "remembering" (1 Cor. 10:16-22). When we "remember" Christ's death through eating and drinking there is a sense in which we are participating once again in that death. This does not mean that Christ is being re-sacrificed or that I am being re-converted, both of which are once for all time events. It means that I am actively entering into the benefits of his cross again.

The Lord's Supper is a sacramental sign that is a "seal" of the forgiveness I have received in Christ and the sacrifice that he made on my behalf (Rom. 4:11; Matt. 26:26-28). The Table of the Lord is a proclamation that God has adopted me as his own and poured out his forgiveness and mercy over me, and that I have a share in the benefits of the redemptive work of Christ.

PRACTICAL CONCERNS

Finally, we need to consider a few practical concerns. There are many that we could add, but we will leave those for the worship leaders and the elders of a local church to work out.

Should an elder lead the Meal? While many traditions hold to this, we do not get from the Bible a mandate that the Lord's Supper must be led by an officer in the church. There is a logic and practical benefit to this, but no biblical requirement. Certainly a church's practice of the Meal will reflect the leadership and teaching of its elders, however.

How often should it be practiced? All that we know from the Bible is that when it is practiced, it should be done rightly. The frequency of references to the Supper in comparison with other aspects of new covenant worship should provoke us in the direction of 'more often' rather than 'less often,' but whether this means quarterly (as in Calvin's Geneva), monthly (as in many evangelical churches), weekly (as in many 'high church' traditions), or some other rotation is for us to decide in our own setting.

Should we use real bread and real wine? The Bible does not reveal a special significance about the wine being served at the table. The bread was intentionally "unleavened." Many traditions use grape juice, a kind of modern "fruit of the vine." The Bible provides no mandate here, though wisdom would seem to point us toward using bread and drink that do not conjure up shallow or unhelpful images (i.e., we would not use Twinkies and Coke, for instance). There are many practical concerns that impact a church celebrating the Lord's Supper. Perhaps a test for us could be, "Does it help people engage again in the cross of Christ?" or, "Does it allow the best compromise between logistical concerns and spiritual ones?"

The Lord's Supper is a simple act with astounding implications. The Bible helps us to see the bread and the cup in kaleidoscopic fashion—a dizzying array of truths all springing from the most pedestrian of elements. God help us to bring some of this richness to all of our celebrations of the Lord's Supper.

NOTES

ⁱ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, Vol. 4, 17:1.

ⁱⁱ Obtained from

<http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/heidelberg.html> on July 27, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ This overview for the 1st century practice of the Lord's Supper comes from D.A. Carson, *Matthew*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation),

533. Hughes Oliphant Old also provides assistance throughout (*Worship: Reformed According to Scripture*).

^{iv} Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 112.

^v *Reformed According to Scripture*, 113.

^{vi} *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, Vol. 4, trans. by John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 566.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 556.

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} Obtained from http://bookofconcord.org/defense_8_holysupper.php on June 24, 2011.

^x *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 4, 557.

^{xi} *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 4, 557.

^{xii} *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 995.

^{xiii} R.T. France, *Matthew*, 993.

^{xiv} *Matthew*, 994.

^{xv} *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 4., 481ff.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 483.

