

The *SBJT* Forum: The Lord's Supper

Editor's Note: In this Forum each contributor was asked to respond to the following question: What advice would you give to pastors regarding the celebration of the Lord's Supper in our churches?

D. A. Carson: In brief compass, I think I'd organize my advice into three areas.

First, make sure that your own theology of the Lord's Supper is stable, mature, exegetically grounded, and thought through. I suspect that one of the reasons why we settle for mere rote in our celebration of the Lord's Supper is that we have not done the work that would enable us to be much fresher and more evocative.

Practically speaking, that means, above all, doing careful exegesis and reading several major, reliable commentaries on the crucial passages—not least the words of institution in the Synoptic Gospels, the well-known 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 and the less well-known 1 Corinthians 10:14-22, and some passages that do not primarily refer to the Lord's Supper at all but have a rather indirect connection (such as the "bread of life" discourse in John 6). Precisely what does Paul mean when he writes that "the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks" is "a participation in the blood of Christ"? (Suggestion: Begin with the NICNT commentary on this passage by Gordon D. Fee!) Read some theological works that treat this subject from different stances.

Once in a while I suspect that our approach to these matters may be worse among the better trained, theologically speaking, than among the less well educated. A certain percentage of Baptist

pastors, well enough educated to know something of the historic positions that others have taken, feel somewhat intimidated by the fact that most other positions refer to the traditional Baptist approach (the so-called Zwinglian position) to the Lord's Supper as "minimalist"—and who wants to be "minimalist" about anything in God's Word? Though they are sure that the transubstantiation of Roman Catholicism is wrong, and are equally suspicious of orthodox Lutheranism's consubstantiation, they are less sure, perhaps, that the Reformed heritage is mistaken on this point. Feeling threatened, they never do enough work in the area to find satisfying answers, to have their doubts cleared up one way or another. It is safer, and certainly a lot easier, to retreat to well-known and comforting formulae, even if no one is quite sure what they all mean!

If this were another sort of article, it would be good at this point to lay out some of the neglected turning-points in the doctrine. But granted the constraints, my first piece of advice—and we shall shortly see that it is eminently practical advice—is to read and study in this area until your grasp of what Scriptures says is stable, mature, exegetically grounded, and thought through.

Second, carefully identify the various *pastoral functions* of the Lord's Supper. Once you are clear about these, it will become

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easier to build one or another of these themes into each Lord's Supper service. That will not only be faithful to the text, but will generate fresh reflection on the part of the congregation.

For convenience, I will list six of the pastoral reflections I have in mind. This list is certainly not exhaustive. All six are drawn from 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 (though these themes are also found elsewhere).

(1) The Lord's Supper is a center and a symbol of Christian unity. That is made clear not only by the intrinsic symbolism (we all partake of one loaf, 10:17), but also by the context in which Paul berates the Corinthians for their callous lack of concern for unity in the assembly (11:17-22). Indeed, recalling that the Greek word behind "participation" in 10:16 is *koinōnia*, there is a sense in which we may see ourselves as "the fellowship of the body of Christ." And that terminology prepares us for the extraordinary emphasis on Christian unity, despite diversity, in chapter 12.

(2) The Lord's Supper is a time to remember (11:24-25). In some ways it is a shocking thing that we should have to be given a repetitive rite to call us to remember Jesus and his death on our behalf. But, in fact, we can become so engrossed in administration, praise choruses, expositions of the Psalms, seminars on marriage and on how to rear your children, and countless more good things, that Jesus' death and resurrection become the presupposition of our faith, and no longer its center. So in his incalculable wisdom, Jesus bequeathed a rite, a rite to be repeated, one of whose functions is to call us back to basics.

When I was a boy, I detested the hymn, "Tell me the old, old story," especially with lines like "Tell me the story slowly": I was not into "slow" teaching at all, thank you.

But as I have grown older, I have appreciated the wisdom of so many of the lines of that hymn: "Tell me the story often / For I forget so soon; / The early dew of morning / Has passed away at noon." There are things Christians are to remember, for their good. But that means, of course, that *mere rote* will not necessarily accomplish that end.

(3) The Lord's Supper is a proclamation of Jesus' death (11:26): by this rite, Paul says, we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The verb "proclaim" is regularly used in evangelistic contexts, in the matrix of the heraldic declaration of the gospel to unbelievers. That is rather different, I think, from the way it is done in many Baptist churches. We often leave time for unbelievers and non-members to leave. Paul could envisage this rite as an evangelistic opportunity. This does *not* mean that he wanted unbelievers to partake of the elements: the context shows this was not the case. But the celebration of the Lord's Supper was done in such a way, doubtless with a combination of word and ordinance, that the significance of the rite drove home what the cross was about.

(4) The Lord's Supper is not only a temporary ordinance, but a forward-looking one. It proclaims the Lord's death only "until he comes"—and that fact holds up before us the prospect of his coming. In the new heaven and the new earth, no one will need a rite like this to remind us of Jesus and his death on our behalf; no longer will there be need for evangelistic proclamation. As the Passover rites of the Jews (from which, after all, the Lord's Supper emerged) developed over the years, it came to incorporate the wish-prayer, "Next year in Jerusalem!" Christians eat the bread and drink the cup, and cry, "Until he comes!"

(5) The Lord's Supper provides regular

opportunity for spiritual and moral self-examination (11:27-29). The precise interpretation of these verses is disputed, and this is not the place to weigh in on those disputes. What cannot be missed, however, is that the Lord's Supper is a covenant renewal ceremony. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (11:25), Jesus insists. A covenant renewal ceremony like this affords us the opportunity to renew our vows, but that brings renewed responsibility—and therefore renewed obligation to examine our hearts to ensure that this is not, for us, some merely formal religious rite whose significance we can safely ignore. That would be the equivalent of lifting our glasses and saying, "I remember the cross of Jesus Christ!"—at the very moment resolving to cheat on our income taxes, to nurture bitterness against our parents, spouse, or children, to despise the gospel, and to mock the Master's blood-bought people.

(6) The Lord's Supper can be dangerous (11:30-32). Not all sickness is the direct result of a particular sin, of course (reflect on John 9!), but this passage warns us that *some sickness may be*.

Third, work out some practical ways in which the themes you develop out of my first point, and their pastoral functions as developed in the second point, may be incorporated into actual meetings.

Of course, if it is your practice to celebrate the Lord's Supper as a kind of ten-minute adjunct service to a larger meeting, then you are rather limited in what you can do (except expand your practice now and then!). But even in such a limited frame, there are several possibilities. The hymn or two you choose might be related to one of these pastoral functions. The prayers and brief pastoral remarks might focus on one of those functions. Passages

of Scripture that expand on these themes might be read, and their thematic connection with a "standard" passage like 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 carefully noted.

Alternatively, it might be possible now and then, or even regularly (every couple of months?), to incorporate the Lord's Supper a little more closely into the entire service, with the hymns and reading and prayers being more closely tied to themes and pastoral functions found within the passages dealing with the Lord's Supper. If the fifth pastoral function I mentioned is what is being emphasized, there might be a time for individuals to pray openly in confession, which could be for personal sins, corporate sins, or national sins. If there is an eschatological orientation, the entire service could work through relevant readings and hymns, with a sermon on (say) John 14:1ff. or Revelation 21-22, followed by the Lord's Supper to remind us that we stand between the "already" and the "not yet" as we look back to the cross and remember, and forward to the long-anticipated "until he comes" and cry, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" Such a service could end on a high note: a joyous singing of "Lo, he comes with clouds descending" (ideally with the 18th century English melody, with full orchestra!).

Certainly on other occasions I have used the Lord's Supper with an evangelistic emphasis, used it to examine the importance of Christian unity (part of an exposition of John 17?), and used it to warn people both of God's eternal punishment and his temporal punishments.

My advice, in brief compass, is this: understand from Scripture what the Lord's Supper is about, think through what pastoral functions it chiefly serves, and imaginatively find ways to incorporate your findings into the public meetings of the

people of God.

C. Ben Mitchell: Since the Lord's Supper is the last vestige of anything truly corporate in most evangelical worship services, I have come to think we ought to observe the supper more often than we do—perhaps every week.

Because of my speaking schedule, I spend about half the Sundays of the year in a church other than the one of which I am a member. My comments, therefore, reflect my experience of worship in many different contexts. I would never claim that my experiences are universal, but they are nevertheless experiences of worship in a number of non-liturgical or "low church" evangelical churches in every region of the country.

In the midst of the so-called "worship wars" I have tried to observe carefully the way worship services are constructed. Whether in a "traditional" setting or in a "seeker-friendly" setting, one almost universal observation is that there is nothing *corporate* about corporate worship—except, of course, that the worshippers happen to be in the same location as they worship.

Everything that goes on during the average evangelical worship service could be done alone in private. The songs sung in most evangelical worship seldom refer to the corporate life of the church. In fact, the church is almost never mentioned in the singing. This despite the fact that it is our affirmation that Christ died *for the church* and that he is returning *for the church*.

For whatever reason, there seem to be few churches that observe any public reading of scripture these days. Scripture may be read just before the sermon, but it is not read corporately. In the past year, only in one church I attended did we read scripture together. In that same church—and

in that one alone—we also recited the Apostles' Creed together.

The corporate recitation of the Lord's Prayer, once a staple in traditional evangelical churches, no longer seems to have a place. Again, in my admittedly limited experience this year, everything I did in the services I attended could have been done in a bubble or at home with a tape player (for the sermon). The worship service did not require that any other person be present. The sole exception was the observance of the Lord's table. I could not observe the Lord's Supper by myself. The table requires at least two.

The Lord Jesus "broke bread"—a very communal thing to do—with his disciples. Sharing a meal together, even a symbolic meal like the Lord's Supper—emphasizes, cultivates, and reflects a sense of community, a sense of being part of a body of people who share important things in common.

My sense is that most evangelical churches do not observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday out of convenience rather than conviction. The supper takes time to prepare, time to observe in the service, and requires some reflection when it comes to constructing the service to include it. These are all good reasons, it seems to me, to include the supper in our weekly Lord's Day services.

One argument against observing the Lord's Supper every week is that it might become less meaningful and, therefore, mundane. Interestingly, that argument is not applied to the new choruses that include the same refrain sung over and over. That argument is not applied to our new "low church liturgy" that includes a 30 minute bloc of singing at the front end of the service every week. Sharing the supper together every week could (and

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should) be a very meaningful reminder that Christ gave his life for the church, a body of believers who are meeting together as a body to share a communion meal with one another in the presence of God.

Another argument against observing the Lord's Supper every week is that Jesus did not command that we do so. When we share this supper in the worship service, we remember Jesus's death till he returns, and we do so together with other believers. Clearly, when Jesus inaugurated the supper as a church practice, he only required that we observe it until he comes back. He did not say we had to observe it every time we meet together for worship. He also did not say we could not observe it every time we meet together for worship. My argument is not that we are obligated to observe the supper weekly, but that it is preferable to do so, especially in light of the rampant individualism reflected in most current worship practices.

Whatever your own view on this subject, ask yourself this question the next time you are in a worship service: Is there anything I'm doing right now in worship that requires others to be present?

Mark E. Dever: In our church we have lately been appreciating an old hymn that is new to many of us, "Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended?" The second verse reads

Who was the guilty?
Who brought this upon Thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus,
hath undone Thee!
'Twas I, Lord Jesus,
I it was denied Thee;
I crucified Thee.

Surely this is the very heart of Christian devotion. Christ's body was broken and blood was shed for us, to deliver us from

the penalty and power of our old master, sin. Sunday by Sunday, even in churches that misunderstand—or even deny—the significance of the sacrifice of Christ, some variation on the Lord's Supper is reenacted. There at the very heart of the weekly gatherings of all churches, even for those that little comprehend it, the heart of the gospel is set forth and revealed for all to see.

I fear that many churches that do understand the gospel have neglected the regular observance that Christ himself enjoined on us. No other command that we have received from Him is to be performed regularly in the same way that this is. "Do this," Jesus said, as He instructed His followers in a kind of simplified Passover Feast, summarizing and setting forth the deliverance He was about to bring them on the cross. The early disciples understood that this supper was to be observed regularly, and it seems that they did so.

Other commands given us by the Lord Jesus are different. Baptism happens once. Foot-washing is a picture of service. Love is continual. But in the Lord's Supper we have a rite, a particular religious action, that Jesus commanded us to observe repeatedly. Why? I suppose, as He said, to proclaim His death and its meaning, and probably also to give witness to participating in the gospel and to preach it to our own souls.

If we receive the biblical witness about Christ's death for us and our sin, and if we believe that it is only by His death that we have been justified and delivered from sin's lordship over us, then we should take particular delight in the Lord's Supper. It is at His table that we are specially showing our unity in Christ, in remembering His sacrifice for us as we proclaim His death, and in making ourselves visible as a family of His followers "being made holy" (Heb 10:14). We gather in thanks for Christ's

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cross, in commitment to follow Him as His disciples and in hopes of His soon return.

How can we more fully and seriously honor Christ's command in our churches? I would challenge each pastor reading these words to resolve to be faithful in leading our congregations in the Lord's supper regularly, encouraging them to prepare well, and leading them in an appropriate response. Let's think about each one of those matters briefly and in turn—regularity, preparation, and response.

First, about regularity. It seems in the New Testament that the pattern was for Christians to observe the Lord's Supper frequently (though we do not know exactly how frequently). While there is no biblical answer to how often (historically answers have ranged from annually at Easter to every week!), our congregation has settled on the first Sunday of each month. It's possible that we could move to do it more frequently; unlikely that we would move to do it any less (say, quarterly). The frequency of our obedience to this command may say something about our understanding of its significance. We should not base our obedience merely on avoiding others' abuses. Our practice should not be to deny regular communing simply because some sacramentalists have wrongly taken the Lord's Supper to be saving. Faith alone in Christ alone is saving. And it is that same Lord Jesus Christ who calls us into regular fellowship at His table, around this sign of His crucifixion.

Second, about preparation. Even as we prepare people for other areas of obedience by instructing them, so in coming to the Lord's Table, we should be regularly teaching our congregation. Teach the new members your statement of faith, and in that you will surely have some statement on the Lord's Table. Preach God's Word

expositionally, and you will have occasion to teach on Christ's cross, and on this supper. Announce a week beforehand each upcoming celebration of the Lord's Supper. And while reminding them of this, exhort them to prepare by examining themselves (1 Cor 11:28), particularly looking at anything that would be standing between them and God, or them and some other member of the body with whom they will be communing. This can be a great time for working out divisions in the church. How often I have seen brothers and sisters reconciled as they consider their own participation in this feast, particularly in the context of the local congregation, where others know them and will see them partake. Announce at the beginning of the service, or before the celebration itself, that this table is only for Christians. In good conscience you need to obey the Scriptural concerns in 1 Corinthians 11 and speak clearly to non-Christians and to the hardened hypocrites present, directly warning such people not to partake. Lead the congregation in renewing the vows of your church covenant. Print them in your hymnals, and stand and read them again together. Spend time in silent confession of sins. Perhaps encourage the congregation to use the words of the covenant as a means to examine their own souls. Remind yourself of why it is you so desperately need the cross. Remember again why it would kill Christ to love you.

Finally, about appropriate response. One Roman Catholic friend who attended our communion service once said, "It was a lovely service, very serious, but where was the joy?" Good question. As I reflected on that, I think that there may have been a great deal of joy there that he simply did not pick up on. In our congregation, while the cup is being distributed we sing a

hymn, usually focused on the cross, something like the hymn I mentioned at the beginning. Those hymns are sometimes the highlight of the month. I remember some months back singing “It is well with my soul” with many in the congregation dissolved in tears of joyful gratitude as we sang that third stanza,

My sin—O, the bliss of this glorious
thought,
My sin—not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no
more,
*Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, O my
soul!*

And then to sing the fourth stanza! You can go look that one up yourself. I changed the final hymn, and we just stood and sang this one again. That was some of the most wonderful heartfelt expression of thanksgiving to God that I have seen this congregation—or any—provoked to offer. And pastors, discipline yourself to lead the congregation in a prayer of thanks, full of hope and joy, for what Christ has done for you. Our response should be marked by a serious joy and a prayerful thanks.

So let us obey this command of Christ, and let us obey regularly and carefully and with thanksgiving. By so doing, we will proclaim Christ’s death until He comes.

Timothy George: Have you ever heard someone describe the Lord’s Supper as “merely a symbol,” “a mere memorial,” or an ordinance at which we “merely remember” what Jesus did for us on the cross? I am against the theology of “merely.” Baptist Christians need to recover a robust doctrine of the real spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, a teaching that avoids both the crass literalism of sacramentalist views and the bare memorialism of left-wing

reductionist views.

At the time of the Reformation, the Lord’s Supper was a matter of great dispute and became an occasion of division among the Protestant reformers. Of course, none of the reformers accepted the Roman Catholic dogma of transubstantiation. Luther, however, appealed to what he took to be the clear literal meaning of the words of institution, “This is my body.” This led him to affirm the real bodily presence of Christ, “in, with, and under” the bread and wine of the Eucharist. At the Colloquy of Marburg in 1529, Luther and Zwingli parted company over this issue. Zwingli insisted (rightly) that the body of Christ was at the right hand of the Father in heaven. The Lord’s Supper was an occasion to remember the event of Calvary. The bread and wine were only signs of a reality far removed in time from the believers who gathered (once a year in Zurich) at the Lord’s Table.

John Calvin forged a middle way between Zwingli’s minimalism and Luther’s literalism. He agreed with Zwingli that the literal body of Christ could not be present on the altars of Christendom for the ascended Christ was with the Father in heaven. But he agreed with Luther that the bread and cup were more than “naked signs.” They were symbols that conveyed through faith the reality of that which they signified, namely, the real spiritual presence of Christ with His church. How did this happen? Calvin was not big on metaphysics, but his answer was that the Holy Spirit so united the believers on earth with the risen Christ in heaven that “their souls are truly nourished from the flesh of Christ.” Moreover, this communion does not happen by bringing Christ down from heaven and locking him up in the elements of bread and wine, as

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the Lutheran teaching seemed to imply. No, in communion the Holy Spirit lifts our hearts up to the heavenly sanctuary where Christ is the Host at the banquet table of the redeemed. There is a strong eschatological dimension to this Eucharistic theology. Every celebration of the Lord's Supper is a foretaste of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

The fact that the Lord's Supper is not absolutely necessary for salvation does not lessen its significance as an efficacious "means of grace." It must be admitted that for much of our history, Baptists have been drawn toward the Zwinglian side of the Eucharistic debate. For good reason, we have wanted to avoid the sacramental imperialism so evident in Roman Catholic and some Anglican teachings about the Holy Meal Jesus gave to his disciples. But there is another stream of teaching about the Lord's Supper in the Baptist heritage, and our worship would be much richer if it could once again become the mainstream. The Second London Confession (1677-1689) declares that in receiving the Eucharist, we "spiritually receive and feed upon Christ crucified and all the benefits of His death: the Body and Blood of Christ not being corporally or carnally but spiritually present to the faith of believers." This is what Calvin meant by the real spiritual presence of Christ in the Supper.

Charles H. Spurgeon also understood the Lord's Supper to be one of the external means of grace through which believers are spiritually nourished in the Christian life. In the Lord's Supper, he said, believers have the blessed privilege of going "right through the veil into Christ's own arms." Because the Lord's Supper offers nothing less than an encounter with the living Christ himself, we must not let it degenerate into a drab, funeral-like "mere

memorial." Spurgeon criticized the "downgrading" of communion among Baptists in his day and his words still ring true in ours:

Whenever we repair to the Lord's Table, which represents to us the Passover, we ought not to come to it as a funeral. Let us select solemn hymns, but not dirges. Let us sing softly, but nonetheless joyously. These are no burial feasts; those are not funeral cakes which lie upon this table, and yonder fair white linen cloth is no winding-sheet. "This is my body," said Jesus, but the body so represented was no corpse; we feed upon a living Christ. The blood set forth by yonder wine is the fresh life-blood of our immortal King. We view not our Lord's body as clay-cold flesh, pierced with wounds, but as glorified at the right hand of the Father. We hold a happy festival when we break bread on the first day of the week.

In my own experience as a Christian, two experiences of communion stand out above all the rest. The first took place some years ago at First Baptist Church, Dallas, presided over by the late W. A. Criswell. After a beautiful description of the meaning of the Lord's Supper, the congregation was asked to kneel, (yes, here was an SBC church with kneelers!) and receive with reverence the bread and the cup. Our hearts were indeed lifted toward heaven by this service of joyful remembrance and real communion with the living Christ. The other service happened more recently at the great Amsterdam 2000 conference convened by Billy Graham. Some 12,000 delegates from more than 200 countries came together to commit our lives to the task of world evangelization. We concluded the meeting with a communion worship service. Despite our many differences, we were united by the Christ of the Great Commission. Some of those who gathered at Amsterdam have since given

their lives for the cause of Christ, and others are still persecuted and harassed for the sake of the Gospel. But at that service, our hearts were lifted together toward heaven and that vision of the blood-bought throng from every tribe and tongue and people and nation singing in unison a hymn of communion: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power, and wealth, and wisdom, and might, and honor, and glory and blessing!”

Scott Hafemann: In giving my “advice,” this is not the first time in the forum that I have emphasized that we must keep in mind that “context is king” in determining the meaning and significance of the Scriptures. I do so again, however, because there is no place in the life of the church where context is so often forgotten than in our celebrations of the Lord’s Supper. As a result, the Lord’s Supper takes on a host of meanings and functions different from and even contrary to its own nature.

The most important thing to emphasize regarding the Lord’s Supper, therefore, is that its context is our new covenant relationship with God brought about by Christ (see esp. Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). More specifically, the Lord’s Supper is a formal ceremony designed to recall the inauguration of this covenant. As such, it recalls the cross, since it is the death of Christ that brings about the forgiveness of sins upon which the new covenant is built (Jer 31:34). Like the elders on Mt. Sinai who, sprinkled with the “blood of the covenant,” ate in God’s presence as a sign of peace with their Sovereign (Exod 24:8; Matt 26:28), God’s people are now invited to symbolize their reconciliation with God by eating bread and wine in God’s presence, having been covered with the blood of Christ.

Hence, as in all such *covenant* ceremo-

nies, the Lord’s Supper points us in three interrelated directions, all of which are “remembered” in celebrating this covenant meal.¹

First, our covenant relationship with God is grounded in his sovereign and free acts of provision and deliverance, which are declared in covenant ceremonies in an initial statement of his provision. Under the old covenant we proclaim God’s great act of delivering his people from slavery in Egypt (Exod 20:2), symbolized in the Passover meal (Exod 12:14-20). Under the new covenant we announce God’s even greater act of delivering us from our slavery to sin through the death of the Messiah (Mark 10:45; 14:24; Matt 26:28b), symbolized in the new “Passover” meal Jesus ate with his disciples (Mark 14:12-16; Luke 22:15). Above all, the Lord’s Supper declares the life-freeing and life-transforming grace of God to his people in the cross of Christ. This is God’s fundamental act of provision in the past by which he establishes our covenant relationship with him.

Second, covenant ceremonies often imply or explicate the way of life embodied in God’s commands that is enabled by, corresponds to, and expresses the reality of the reconciled relationship established by God’s acts of provision (cf. Exod 20:3ff.; 24:12). Thus, keeping the Passover as part of the feast of unleavened bread was to be “a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth. For with a strong hand the Lord has brought you out of Egypt” (Exod 13:9-10). This is why, in announcing the new covenant, Jesus pronounces a word of judgment against Judas during the meal (Matt 26:20-25; Mark 14:21) and why Paul calls for self-examination in partaking of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:27-32), having severely chastised

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those who were abusing it with their lack of love for one another (1 Cor 11:17-23). Indeed, Paul can even point to the judgment and discipline of God already being meted out on the one who “eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner” and in so doing is “guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:27). Looking back at the cross focuses our attention on our life with God and others here and now.

There is no “cheap grace,” easy believism, or repentance-free faith associated with the new covenant. Reconciliation with God as a result of his love for us in Christ, proclaimed in the Lord’s Supper, must express itself in reconciliation with one another, evidenced in considering other’s needs more important than our own (1 Cor 11:33-34). For unlike Israel under the old covenant, all of God’s people under the new are promised the transformed heart and power of the Spirit necessary to keep God’s commands (Jer 31:33-34; Ezek 36:25-27)! To partake of the Lord’s Supper while at the same time “despising the church of God” (1 Cor 11:22) is consequently a contradiction in terms that denies the reality of the cross in one’s life. God’s commands flow from his gifts of grace, and hence become the means and conditions for persevering in our covenant relationship with him.² God’s provision in Christ in the past, declared and symbolized in the Lord’s Supper, becomes the platform for a Christ-like life in the present. As such, the Lord’s Supper also declares what it means to be God’s people and calls us to it, while at the same time warning us of God’s discipline and judgment for our disobedience.

Third, covenant ceremonies entail the promises and curses that come about as a result of keeping or breaking its stipula-

tions. So too, our covenant relationship, declared and symbolized in the Lord’s Supper, entails a promise of blessing for those who, in a reconciled relationship with God, are now enabled by the cross and the Spirit to keep the covenant with their obedience of faith. Just as the Passover pointed forward to the promised land, so too the Lord’s Supper points forward to that day when “it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” and Christ will eat it again with his people (Luke 22:15, 18; Mark 14:25; Matt 26:29). Thus, “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death *until he comes*” (1 Cor 11:26). In pointing back to the cross, the Lord’s Supper rebounds to the future, since God’s acts of provision in the past secure his promises for the age to come. Jesus dies on the cross as the betrayed Son of Man (Matt 26:24; Mark 14:21; Luke 22:22) who will come to vindicate his people and to judge all humanity (Matt 24:29-31; Mark 13:24-27; 14:62). Thus, the forgiveness of sins continually celebrated in the Lord’s Supper is at the same time a word of promise that God’s people will indeed “drink [the fruit of the vine] new with [Christ] in [his] Father’s kingdom” (Matt 26:29; cf. Mark 14:25). By its very repetition the Lord’s Supper makes clear that the call of the new covenant is not perfection over night but perseverance over a lifetime, an essential aspect of which is depending on the merciful forgiveness of God. Moreover, as the fulfillment of the covenant meal celebrated with the elders of Israel on Mt. Sinai (Exod 24:1-11), the Lord’s Supper anticipates the covenant meal to be celebrated on Mt. Zion when God “will swallow up death forever” (Isa 25:8). The Lord’s Supper is inaugurated eschatology in word and deed. As such, it is not only the foundation of faith and a call to its obedience, but also an induce-

ment to hope.

Finally, these “three directions” embodied in the Lord’s Supper are not isolated from one another but are inextricably interwoven together. God’s provision in Christ in the past (the foundation of faith) leads to his commands for our lives in the present (the call to love) in anticipation of being with him in his judgment to come (the object of our hope). The Lord’s Supper thus reminds us that we now find ourselves living between the two comings of Christ, called as a result to be reconciled to God and to one another. Our life of faith is enabled by the cross of Christ and motivated by the promises of God that Christ’s death makes possible. The unbreakable link between these three elements, powerfully proclaimed in our celebration of the Lord’s Supper, means, therefore, that obedience to God’s will (i.e., keeping the covenant stipulations) is the direct and outward expression of trusting in God’s promises, both of which are granted in his prior acts of provision. This is why the explicit focus of the Lord’s Supper is on the cross. The Lord’s Supper, in symbolizing the death of Christ, at the same time calls us to the obedience of faith, warns us of God’s judgment, and manifests the wonders of God’s grace and mercy from beginning to end.

The Lord’s Supper makes clear that God’s great acts of provision and deliverance, from the exodus from Egypt, to Christ’s death and resurrection, to his return to judge the world in righteousness, together with God’s constant work in the hearts and wills of his people throughout redemptive history, are not isolated acts of divine power and love. They are the means by which God brings us into a relationship with him as *his* people. Consequently, God’s provisions never stand alone. Every

act of God’s provision brings with it promises for the future, which in turn inevitably lead to the commands that embody our response to the God who provides. These commands depend on and express the reality of what God has done, is doing, and will do on our behalf. God’s demands correspond to his gifts, past, present, and future. The converse is also true. The promises of God for the future are dependent upon keeping his commands in the present as they flow from what God has done in the past.

This is why, as in the covenant ceremonies of the past (Exod 13:3; 20:8; Deut 5:15; 8:18; 16:3; 24:18, 22; etc.), especially the Passover (Exod 12:14, 17, 24; 13:10), we are called as God’s people of the new covenant to “remember” Christ’s death by symbolically re-enacting the Lord’s Supper (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:25). Within the covenant context, to “remember” Christ in the Lord’s Supper is not merely to rehearse history, but to relive it in God’s presence as that which is true *for us*. The purpose of the Lord’s Supper is not to recall data from the past but to call us anew to trust Christ’s provision in our every day life within the body of Christ as we anticipate Christ’s coming again to judge the world. For this reason, in thinking about what advice I would give to pastors concerning the Lord’s Supper, it would be to keep communion located within the rich, historical-redemptive context of the covenant, and to teach it to their churches as such, so that celebrating communion becomes the exhortation to faith, hope, and love that it was meant to be.

ENDNOTES

¹I have tried to map out the threefold nature of our covenant relationship with God and its implications for our lives in

Christ in my *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith: Understanding the Heart of the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

²See now the important work of Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).