

# **Rethinking The Lord's Supper**

**by Eric Svendsen**

Perhaps one of the most misunderstood areas of ecclesiology has to do with the significance of the Lord's Supper. Since the Reformation, much has been written about the presence of Christ in the so-called "elements," whether there is a real presence or a symbolic presence. This has been a popular debate among Roman Catholics, Calvinists, Lutherans and Zwinglians to name a few. Unfortunately, because of this preoccupation with the "presence of Christ" debate, many other aspects of the Lord's Supper have been either downplayed or ignored altogether by these same groups. The problem is compounded by the prevailing mentality that supposes we have found all truth that is truth and that there's nothing left to consider or reconsider. Indeed, many of the things that will be brought up in this article are common knowledge to many Christians (and especially scholars), but, for one reason or another, have not been given the weight due them.

We would like to address four such aspects of the Lord's Supper:

They are:

(1) its centrality;

(2) its frequency;

(3) its focus; and

(4) its form.

None of these is, in our opinion, expendable or otherwise less important than any other aspect.

## **The Centrality of the Lord's Supper**

Seemingly one of the most pressing tenets in the constitution or ecclesiological-doctrinal statement of any given evangelical institution (church or seminary) is the centrality of preaching. This tenet is often stated as though its inclusion or exclusion is the measure by which an institution is judged to be biblical or non-biblical. But just what is meant by the "centrality" of preaching? If by this phrase one means that the church is to be actively involved in proclaiming the gospel, then we couldn't agree more. If, on the other hand, one means by this phrase that preaching is to be the central focus of the church meeting (as I suspect is the case), then we disagree. There is no evidence in the NT that the church came together to be preached to; nothing to suggest anything like our modern emphasis on "preaching." The evidence to the contrary will be dealt with in future articles; in any case, it cannot be taken up now.

What then is the central focus of the meeting? Surprisingly the NT has much to say about this. On one level the focus is to participate in mutual edification (Heb 10:25; 1 Cor 14:26). Yet even here the focus is a secondary one. The texts cited do not explicitly give this as the purpose for the assembly (though I believe it is an important objective), but rather merely state that this must take place during the assembly. The central focus of the meeting is accompanied by a purpose clause in the NT. In Acts 20:7 Luke says, "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread . . . ." The thing that distinguishes this purpose for gathering together from any other purpose is the presence of the telic infinitive "to break bread," which really means "in order to break bread." Hence, the expressed purpose for coming together as a church in the NT is to celebrate the Lord's Supper. One might object that Luke is merely recording what happened in this instance and that narrative cannot be used to determine what is normative for the church. Besides, one passage does not a doctrine make; there must be other texts of Scripture to support this if it is in fact to be viewed as normative. In response to the first objection, neither then have we any ground for meeting on the first day of the week, since this is the only Scripture in the NT that explicitly says this is what the early church did. Moreover, the view that narrative in the NT is written solely to record historical events and cannot therefore be used to determine normative church practice is naive and is rejected by all NT scholarship. Granted, Luke did record historical events; but he did not record all historical events. Instead, he selectively recorded those events which would best instruct the early churches.

In response to the second objection; very well then, Paul says the same thing in 1 Cor 11. First Corinthians 11 is often overlooked in discussions pertaining to the central focus of the church meeting. Yet this passage twice states the purpose of coming together as a church. That Paul is concerned with the church meeting is clear from v. 18; "first of all, when you come together as a church I hear there are divisions among you." He repeats this in v. 20; "Therefore, when you come together in the same place [i.e., as a church], it is not to eat the Lord's Supper." One might think it strange that someone arguing for the centrality of the Lord's Supper would want to mention this verse at all. After all, how can one contend that the Lord's Supper is central to the church meeting when Paul so clearly says "when you come together it is not to eat the Lord's Supper"? This is no problem, however, since Paul explains what he means in the next verse ("for each one takes his own supper," v. 21). Paul is not telling the Corinthians not to eat the Lord's Supper when they gather together. Quite the contrary—he's telling them that that's what should be taking place at their meetings, but because of their disunity it can no longer be viewed as the Lord's Supper; instead, it has become their own supper (v. 21). The direct implication of Paul's statement is that when the church comes together it should be "to eat the Lord's Supper" (again, the telic infinitive is used, "in order to eat"). Paul makes this even more clear in v. 33; "so then, brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another." That this is not merely an occasional observance of the Lord's Supper celebrated every so often is clear from his previous statement in v. 18; "when you come together as a church." This leads us to our next point.

## The Frequency of the Lord's Supper

One other direct implication of Paul's statements is that the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated whenever the church "comes together" (vv. 18, 20). It seems clear that Paul has in mind the weekly gathering on the Lord's Day. This means then that Paul expects the Lord's Supper to be celebrated every week, as an integral part of the Lord's Day meeting. This same conclusion may be inferred from the text of Acts 20:7 as well; "On the first day of the week, when we came together to break bread." In many churches today the Lord's Supper is celebrated monthly or quarterly. The rationale for this is standard: Won't the Lord's Supper become common and lose its meaning if we celebrate it weekly? But this standard is rarely applied to other practices of the church. Why not apply it, say, to prayer, or sermons, or collections, or the singing of hymns? Why not meet together as a church once per quarter? Moreover, this kind of reasoning betrays a misunderstanding of the full theological significance of the Supper. Yes, the Supper reminds us of our benefits obtained by Christ's death, but is that all it does? We think not. There are other foci of the Supper that are typically ignored, and it is to these that we will turn next time.

In our last issue we dealt with the centrality of the Lord's Supper as well as its impact on the intended frequency of the Supper. In this issue we want to look at the intended focus of the Supper.

In Luke 22:14-20 Jesus instituted what would later be known as the Lord's Supper. The focus of the Supper has traditionally been derived from v. 19 where Jesus says, "do this in remembrance of me." This phrase has invariably been interpreted to mean that the Supper is to be a time during which we are to focus on the death of Christ; a conscious "reliving" of what Christ had to suffer in order to redeem us. This dictates that the Supper, by necessity, be a time of solemn reflection. The focus then is historical; a "looking back," as it were, to the horrors of the cross. Again, this is the traditional understanding of Jesus' words.

The question is, Does this interpretation fit well with all that we know about the Supper? Indeed, does it fit even the context of Lk 22:14-20? If the focus of the Supper is indeed a "looking back" to the death of Christ, then there is no question that the general mood surrounding the Supper should be one of solemn reflection. There are, however, problems with this understanding. In Acts 2:46 Luke (the same person who recorded Jesus' words of institution) recounts the practice of the early churches; that they "broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts." That this is a reference to the Lord's Supper is evident from Luke's use of the phrase "break bread" elsewhere (e.g. Acts 2:42, 20:7). The interesting thing about this is that Luke here describes the general mood of the early church as they partook of the Lord's Supper. It was not with solemn reflection, but rather with "gladness" that they ate the Supper. The Greek word used here is translated elsewhere as "jubilation" or "exultation." It means rather "ecstatic joy." This is hardly

the word one would expect Luke to use to describe Christians who were reflecting on the horrors of the death of their Lord! Moreover, the context of Lk 22:14-20 hardly favors an interpretation which views the Lord's Supper as a focusing on the past. On the contrary, the whole tenor of this passage is eschatological; a focusing on the future. Notice the first thing Jesus says as he institutes the Supper: "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God" (vv. 15-16). He says essentially the same thing in vv. 17-18: "Take this [cup] and divide it among you. For I tell you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." What does Jesus mean by these words? On the very surface, "until" makes it seem obvious that Jesus intends to partake of a meal again someday. It may be assumed that Jesus has in mind the Messianic wedding banquet already mentioned in Lk 14:16-24 (see also Mt 22:1-14). Jesus mentions this meal again immediately after his words of institution. To those who are his Jesus says, "I grant you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom" (22:30).

Moreover, this future meal is not at all severed from the meal of the Lord's Supper: Jesus describes this meal as a "fulfillment" of the meal he is instituting as the Lord's Supper. In other words, the Messianic banquet is the fulfillment of the Lord's Supper. This means, conversely, that the Lord's Supper is a prefigure of the Messianic banquet. So then, far from the Lord's Supper being a "looking back" to the death of Christ, it is actually a "looking forward," an anticipation and foretaste of the Messianic banquet. In fact, the same terminology is used for both the Lord's Supper and the banquet: they are both called the "Supper" [Gr., *deipnon*] (1 Cor 11:20; Rev 19:9), and they are both called the Lord's "Table" [Gr., *trapeza*] (1 Cor 10:21; Lk 22:30). This understanding of the Supper has further ramifications that will be taken up when we discuss the form of the Lord's Supper (after all, only a banquet can prefigure a banquet!).

But then what did Jesus mean when he said "do this in remembrance of me"? NT scholar Joachim Jeremias in his work, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London, 1966), offers an interesting (and to my mind, convincing) explanation. Jesus' words must be viewed in their Passover setting. It was (and is) the belief of the Jews that the Passover itself was not only a "looking back" at what God had done for Israel, but also a looking forward to future deliverance by the Messiah. A common saying during the Passover was, "On this night they were saved, and on this night they will be saved" (M. J. Harris, "Baptism and the Lord's Supper," In *God's Community* [ed. by D. J. Ellis, 1978], 27). Jeremias' thesis centers on the word *anamnesis* ("remembrance"). He argues that this word is not to be seen as our remembrance of Christ (as it is traditionally understood); rather it is to be understood as God's remembrance of Christ. The wording in the Greek is rather vague—literally "do this toward (or into) my remembrance." The question becomes, Who is to remember who?

The Greek allows three options:

(1) our remembering Christ (the traditional view);

(2) God remembering the Messiah (Jeremias' view); or

(3) Christ remembering us (which, I will argue, is preferable over the other two).

But just what does it mean that God “remembers” the Messiah or that Christ remembers us? This is where the Passover background becomes crucial. So focused was the Passover on the final deliverance of Israel from all her enemies that during every Passover meal a prayer was recited by the participants petitioning God to remember to send the Messiah (Jeremias, 252). This prayer can be found in any Passover Haggadah today. Since the Last Supper was in all likelihood a Passover, it seems certain that Jesus' words were meant as a play on this customary petition to God. All their lives the disciples had learned that the Passover was an opportunity to petition God to send the Messiah—and now here he was, eating the Passover with them! Jesus is in effect saying, “You have been petitioning God to send the Messiah? Very well, here I am. Now I am going away, but I will be back once again to eat this meal with you in my kingdom. In the meantime, continue to eat this meal as a reminder to me that this meal is yet unfulfilled, and as a further petition to God to send the Messiah again.”

But why would God or Christ need to be “reminded” of anything? Is there any chance God will forget what he has promised? On the surface this seems to be a reasonable criticism. Upon closer examination, however, this criticism loses substance. Of course God does not forget anything. Yet it does not follow that God cannot be “reminded” about certain things. After all, David prayed more than once that God would “remember” him or his righteous deeds (Ps 25:6-7; 89:50; 106:4; etc.). David was no maverick in this regard; his was a long standing tradition (cp. Moses, Deut 9:27; Nehemiah, 13:14, 22, 29, 31). Was it because God forgets that Jesus urged us to pray persistently to God: “And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly” (Lk 18:7-8)? There is no conflict between God's omniscience and our reminding him of certain things. The Lord's Supper then is an appeal to Christ (a “reminder,” as it were) to return and bring the meal to its fulfillment—i.e. the Messianic banquet in the kingdom.

But what of the obvious connection of this “remembrance” to Christ's death in 1 Cor 11:26: “As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes”? Isn't this the smoking gun that puts to death Jeremias' thesis? It must first be remembered that Paul and Luke (as traveling companions) had the same understanding of the Lord's Supper. Moreover, there are many indications given by Paul in this very passage that his theology of the Lord's Supper is no different than what we have argued is Luke's theology. It makes little sense to adopt the traditional view (i.e. that we are to remember Christ's death), for then to whom are we proclaiming

Christ's death? To ourselves? To unbelievers? The former makes little sense since there is no need to remind a Christian that Christ died. Besides, in what way would we then be "proclaiming" his death (this word demands a verbal proclamation). The latter is unlikely because in the early church the meetings were made up almost exclusively of believers.

Paul's words make much more sense if we view this proclamation as a petition to God. Paul is explaining in v. 26 just what this "remembrance" is that he referred to in vv. 24-25; it is a proclamation of Christ's death; that is to say, whenever we partake of the Lord's Supper we are "proclaiming" to Christ (reminding him) that he has initiated the New Covenant by means of his death, and that we now want him to bring it to its consummation by coming again. This is in fact the force of the phrase "until he comes" in v. 26. The Greek phrase used here [achris hou] always denotes a goal ("until the goal is reached that he comes"). Hence, the purpose of celebrating the Lord's Supper is to sound a plea for the second coming. In the words of Jeremias: "As often as the death of the Lord is proclaimed at the Lord's Supper, and the maranatha rises upwards, God is reminded of the unfulfilled climax of the work of salvation 'until (the goal is reached, that) he comes.'," (253). Each time the church comes together for the Lord's Supper, Christ is reminded that he is still "not eating" and "not drinking" (Lk 22:16-18), and that the heavenly banquet which the Lord's Supper prefigures has not yet been "fulfilled in the kingdom."

## **To summarize our findings:**

(1) the Lord's Supper is future oriented, not past oriented; (2) the Lord's Supper is intended to prefigure the feast that we will enjoy with the Lord himself at the Messianic banquet; (3) until the Messianic banquet comes we are to celebrate it in absentia, via the Lord's Supper, as a petition to God to remember to send the Messiah. We petition him by proclaiming to him that Christ's death has initiated the New Covenant and that we long for him to bring it to its consummation; (4) every time the Lord's Supper is celebrated it "reminds" Christ that the Messianic banquet remains in its "prefigure" form (i.e. as the Lord's Supper), that he is still "not eating" and "not drinking" with his church, and that the "fulfillment" of the Supper has not yet come.

My contention is this: if the Lord's Supper is the key to arousing God to send the Messiah—if it is the key that prompts Christ to yearn for the consummation—then we as a church have been lax indeed in our practice of the Supper. Our token recognition of the Lord's Supper once per quarter or once per month must then appear as a meaningless ritual to God. How will our lackadaisical approach toward the Lord's Supper ever prompt God to bring about the consummation? At what point are we as a church with one voice proclaiming "maranatha!" (Aramaic for "come, our Lord!") to God? This attitude was the rule in the early church when they celebrated the Lord's Supper. That's why it could be said of them, "they partook of their meals in jubilation and sincerity of heart." Shall we, with the early church, "speed his coming" (2 Pt 3:12) by issuing this plea to God every Lord's Day through the

partaking of the Lord's Supper as a prefigure of the Messianic banquet? Or will we continue to view the Lord's Supper merely as a memorial to Christ's death which has relevance only for the past?

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