THE LORD’S SUPPER: A FEAST OF MEANING

Kory Capps

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The focus of the discussion on the Lord’s Supper over the last few centuries has centered on the presence of Christ in the ordinance. This discussion, though important, has unwittingly left the church impoverished in its understanding of the Lord’s Supper. Though debates are necessary in order to protect the good deposit handed down to us if we are not careful the doctrine we defend will become defined by the issues we debate. This inevitably leads to the neglect of other significant aspects of a doctrine and in the case of the Lord’s Supper some of the most significant aspects.¹

Christ has granted his church a wonderful gift by instituting this supper. We need to look beyond the important questions that years of debate have brought to the forefront in the discussion of the Lord’s Supper and examine the elements of this doctrine that have been overlooked. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to probe the Lord’s Supper with an eye to the context and details of the texts of Scripture that shine light on the neglected significance of this ordinance. My hope is that this paper will aid in seeing the wonder of the Lord’s Supper and encourage reform in practice where necessary.

I will seek to accomplish this goal by viewing the Lord’s Supper from three different angles. First, we will look at the redemptive historical context of the Lord’s

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 363. “On occasion the subject of the spiritual or practical value of the Lord’s Supper has become lost in the dispute over theoretical issues. The theoretical questions are important (they affect the spiritual considerations) and so they ought not be quickly dismissed. If, however, we bog down in the technical issues, and do not move on to deal with the practical meaning, we will have missed the whole point of Christ’s having established the supper. It is not sufficient to comprehend what it means. We must also experience what it means.”
Supper. Second, observations will be made regarding the Lord’s Supper from a brief survey of the relevant texts in the New Testament. Third, the paper will be concluded with implications for the contemporary practice of the Lord’s Supper.

**The Lord’s Supper and Redemptive History**

It is imperative that biblical revelation be understood as progressive in nature and organic in relationship. This means that later revelation is intricately connected to former revelation and vice versa. By moving back and forth between earlier and later revelation we begin to understand how they are linked and we increase our grasp of the storyline of Scripture along with the specific parts we are analyzing. The parts are not fully understood unless they are placed in the appropriate context of the whole. The Lord’s Supper is no different. If we are to properly understand this supper we must place it in the appropriate redemptive historical framework.

This section will therefore focus on some portions the Old Testament that have a direct bearing on how we need to be thinking about the Lord’s Supper. We will focus first on the significance of the meal in biblical thought and then turn our attention to the importance of particular meals throughout the Old Testament.

**The Lord’s Supper: A Meal**

One of the clearest things in the four major texts that handle the inauguration of the Lord’s Supper and yet strangely the most commonly overlooked is the fact that it took place over a meal. This is very significant for the simple fact that a meal in the Bible can communicate a plethora of things. After surveying meals in the Old Testament, Craig Blomberg gives this helpful summary of his findings:

Meals appear in many contexts for many different reasons throughout the Old Testament. They may reflect the typical intimacy of a family, often including
neighbors and friends. In other cases, meals ratify covenants; celebrate military victories; accompany the anointing of kings and the establishment of their reigns; celebrate special family occasions, such as birth, marriage and death; and accompany prescribed festivals that memorialize key events in the salvation history of God’s people.²

When one transitions from the view of the Old Testament to that of the New Testament, the sight is not all that different. Meals continue to retain great significance. S.S. Barchy sums up the meaning of a meal in the first century.

Mealtimes were far more than occasions for individuals to consume nourishment. Being welcomed at a table for the purpose of eating food with another person had become a ceremony richly symbolic of friendship, intimacy and unity. Thus, betrayal or unfaithfulness toward anyone with whom one had shared the table was viewed as particularly reprehensible. On the other hand, when persons were estranged, a meal invitation opened the way to reconciliation. Even everyday meals were highly complex events in which social values; boundaries, statuses and hierarchies were reinforced.³

The simple fact that a meal meant so much and communicated so much in biblical times has a multitude of implications for how we understand the Lord’s Supper. This background, however, is usually missed for we rarely consider the ordinance in the context of a meal and therefore fail to attach this biblical significance to the Lord’s Supper.

The Lord’s Supper: A Covenant Meal

Since it is clear that the genesis of the Lord’s Supper was in the context of a meal it seems wise to pose the question what kind of meal. The following three sections will seek to shed some light on this question. The first thing to consider regarding the


context of meal is the motif of covenant. The four major texts in the New Testament that refer to the Lord’s Supper (Matt 26:17-30; Mk 14:12-26; Lk 22:7-22; 1 Cor 11:17-34) all agree that a covenant was at the heart of this meal. Two of the four texts explicitly say that it was a new covenant meal (Lk 22:20, 1 Cor 11:25). Taking a step back and looking at the rest of the canon sheds light on the significance of a covenant connected with a meal.

There are a few examples where a covenant agreement in the Old Testament was accompanied by a meal. Isaac and Abimelech swore an oath with one another and ate a meal together before they departed (Gen 26:30-31). Jacob and Laban settled their differences through an oath followed by a meal (Gen 31:54). It is also possible to see the narrative of Jacob stealing the blessing of Esau in this light as we see the “importance of meals highlighted by the covenant-making and breaking activities”\(^4\) in this story.

Most important for our purposes, however, is the covenant meal that follows the inauguration of the Mosaic Covenant. In Exodus 24 God mediates his covenant through Moses. During the covenant ceremony Moses reads the book of the covenant to the Israelites who agree to do all that has been commanded them. Moses then offers burnt offerings to the Lord, and after this we read:

Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words. Then Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank (Ex 24:8-11, italics mine).

The heart of the Lord’s Supper is the new covenant that Christ brings about

\(^4\) Craig L. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' meal with sinners*, 35.
through his own death. The fact that it is in the context of a meal is no surprise since this has been a pattern throughout redemptive history. The significance of this ordinance is therefore wrapped up in understanding covenants in general and the new covenant in particular. We miss the forest for the trees when we discuss only the issue of the presence of Christ in the meal and neglect the reality to which the text explicitly says the meal points: the new covenant.⁵

**The Lord’s Supper: A Passover Meal**

The three gospel accounts that contain the inception of the Lord’s Supper all agree upon the fact that it was eaten in the context of the Passover meal. Owing to a lack of details in the narrative it is difficult to know how Jesus utilized already existing elements in the Passover meal to implement the bread and the cup. However, we know enough about the actual practice of the Passover meal to make intelligent inferences about how Jesus might have employed certain components of this meal for his purposes. Robert Stein identifies the six main elements of the Passover meal:

1. **The Passover Lamb**- This was the most significant part of the meal and it reminded them of God’s angel of death passing over them due to this sacrifice.

2. **The Unleavened Bread**- This reminded them of the swiftness of God’s deliverance since they had no time to make bread.

3. **The Bowl of Salt Water**- This reminded them of the tears shed in captivity and the crossing of the Red Sea.

4. **The Bitter Herbs**- This reminded them of the bitterness of being in slavery.

5. The Charoseth—This was a type of fruit that reminded them of the clay that they used to make bricks in their captivity in Egypt.

6. The Four Cups of Wine—These reminded them of the promises of Exodus 6:6-7. The third cup was known as the cup of blessing and the fourth cup was followed by singing.\(^6\)

It is likely that Jesus broke the bread and gave it to his disciples in the place of the unleavened bread. It is also likely that the cup he gave the disciples to drink was the third cup of blessing.\(^7\) Significant also is that during the Passover meal the youngest son was given the role of asking the host questions about the supper such as why is this night different from other nights? The host would then retell the great story of God delivering his people out of Egypt by interpreting every part of the meal that was before them. Since Jesus was the host of this Passover meal he was also the appointed storyteller. He did not reinterpret the Exodus event. Rather, he gave the authoritative interpretation of it by explaining the substance of redemption to which the shadow of Passover testified.

Jesus’ choice in positioning the Last Supper in this context was no coincidence.\(^8\) The Passover meal was the definitive meal of the old covenant people of God. It was the Passover event that actually shaped the Jewish calendar (Ex 12:2) making the first month one in which the great deliverance wrought by God would be remembered in a celebratory meal. The event of the exodus was the defining event of redemption in


the Old Testament. By utilizing this meal Jesus was “interpreting his death as a liberating event like the Passover.” B.B. Warfield argues that the central feature of both meals was a slain lamb that was responsible for acquiring the redemption of the celebrants. Robert Stein suggests these parallels between the Lord’s Supper and the Passover.

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<tr>
<th>The Passover</th>
<th>The Last Supper</th>
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<tr>
<td>God remembers his covenant</td>
<td>God enacts a new covenant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Slavery in Egypt</td>
<td>Slavery to sin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood of Passover Lamb</td>
<td>Blood of Christ the Passover Lamb</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpretation of Elements</td>
<td>Interpretation of Elements</td>
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<td>Call for Continual Celebration</td>
<td>Call for Continual Celebration</td>
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All this being said it is important to note that the apostles and the early church did not carry over the Passover tradition into their practice of the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s Supper was not celebrated yearly with all the elements of the Passover meal, but was likely celebrated weekly with bread and wine in the context of a meal (Acts 2:42-47). The significance of setting the work of Christ in the context of the Exodus liberation was retained by the early church while the actual meal commemorating the event was no longer practiced. It is important to allow the fact that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Passover event to inform our understanding of the Lord’s Supper.

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12 Ibid, 670.

13 It is important to note that Passover, atonement, and covenant are distinct but also inseparable. The Passover was clearly the means by which the people of God were purchased and delivered in order to be brought into a covenant. Both the Passover and the Mosaic covenant point toward atonement as the basis for deliverance and relationship.
The Lord’s Supper: A Sacrificial Meal

The sacrificial system centering in the temple was central to the old covenant people of God. God was instructing his people that he would dwell with them and they could access him but only by means of blood sacrifice and a chosen mediator. In other words, God could be among his people on the basis of substitutionary propitiation offered by the chosen priests. Scripture indicates that the performance of the prescribed sacrifices followed a certain order. The order was sin offering, burnt offering, and peace/fellowship offering (Ex 29:10-34, Num 6:14-17, Ezek 45:13-17, 2 Chron 29:31-36). The sin offering and the burnt offerings were two variations of sacrifice that dealt with the issue of atonement for iniquities and transgressions. The peace offering or the fellowship offering was an offering where the worshipper was allowed to eat most of the animal sacrificed (Lev 7:15-18). Vern Poythress hits it on the head when he sums up the significance of this offering, “To an Israelite this procedure would signify that the worshiper enjoys a meal in the presence of God and with the special blessing of God.”

Looking at the various sacrifices, their significance, and their proper order William Dumbrell concludes that, “the first priority of the sacrificial system is the need for sin to be forgiven. Personal consecration (burnt offering) as a symbol of commitment, ____________

Atonement is therefore foundational to an understanding of Passover and covenant. Passover is also foundational for the people of God to enter into covenant. See further I. Howard Marshall, The Last Supper and The Lord's Supper, 91-93. Further it should be noted that the covenant with Abraham was the basis for bringing about deliverance in the first place and in bringing about the mosaic covenant.


and, finally, the celebration of reconciliation takes place through peace/fellowship offerings.”\textsuperscript{16} In other words, the sacrificial system and the offerings required therein are communicating to us that fellowship with God is the end goal and result of dealing with sin through sacrifice. The slaughtered animals shadowing the work of the Lamb of God led the Israelites into God’s presence to eat a meal in his very presence. At table with God, this is the glorious result of the dying and rising work of Jesus. The Lord’s Supper communicates to us in much the same way that the order of sacrifices communicated to the Israelites. God invites us to his table to fellowship but this is possible only through the death of a substitute. In the Lord’s Supper we celebrate the priest who offered himself as a sacrifice for us that we might sit at table with the Father. The sacrifice of the new covenant is the priest, the lamb, and our very bread and wine. We feast in God’s presence by faith on the slain lamb.

\textbf{The Lord’s Supper: An Eschatological Meal}

One of the wonders of redemptive history is that it stretches back into eternity past and slings us forward into eternity future. God’s speech is the authoritative word on the past, present, and future. What he says about the past is true, what he says about the present is reality, and what he says about the future is inevitable; indeed, it is “future history.”\textsuperscript{17} The Lord’s Supper as we have seen points back into the near past, but it also points away to a time the world has not yet seen. In the three gospel accounts Jesus adds a future thrust to the supper when he says, “Truly I say to you, I will not drink again of

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Graeme Goldsworthy, \textit{According to Plan} (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 96.
this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom” (Matt 26:29).

It is noteworthy that Luke sees this theme as a central one in the Lord’s Supper. Unique to Luke is his double emphasis on the future fulfillment of the supper.

And he said to them, ‘I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.’ And he took a cup, and when had given thanks he said, ‘Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes (Lk 22:15-18, italics mine).

From a salvation historical perspective this supper pointed in two directions. It pointed back to illustrate that it was a partial fulfillment of OT eschatological expectations. It pointed future showing that the fullness of that feast was still to come. The Lord’s Supper is the already of the messianic banquet while at the same time a pointer to the not yet. Isaiah 25 is the clearest articulation of a future messianic banquet that puts the Lord’s Supper in its proper canonical context.

On this mountain the Lord of Hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord will wipe away tears from all faces (Is 25:6-8).

The expectation of Isaiah’s prophecy fills up the Lord’s Supper with meaning and spills over as only the future can fully contain and actualize these words.

It is not surprising that Jesus emphasized celebration and feasting when he spoke about the kingdom coming in fullness. He told his disciples that they would feast in the kingdom (Lk 22:28-30). He told the faith-filled centurion that he would recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matt 8:5-13). He likened the kingdom to a king inviting people to a banquet (Matt 22:1-14). The Lord’s Supper is a symbol that the kingdom of God has broken into the present. It is also a reminder that the best is yet to
come, a kind of appetizer.  

Peter Leithart notes this connection when he states that the Lord’s Supper “is not merely a sign of the eschatological feast, as if the two were separate feasts. Instead, the supper is the early stage of that very feast. Every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper we are displaying in history a glimpse of the end of history and anticipating in this world the order of the world to come.”

The Lord’s Supper then must be linked to the Lamb’s Supper. This wedding supper of the Lamb spoken of in Revelation 19 is the climax of all the biblical strands of feasting. It is the hope to which the Lord’s Supper hinted. “The omega point toward which history is moving is the wedding feast of the Lamb…In short, this is the way the world ends: with neither bang nor whimper but with the laughter of a wedding feast.” In my view the future dimension of the Lord’s Supper, which brings with it an element of celebration, is missing in our understanding and practice of the ordinance today.

I have attempted to view the Lord’s Supper through a wide angle lens allowing

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18 Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, 988-989. Grudem connects the Lord’s Supper back to the eating of Adam and Eve in the presence of God and argues that the Lord’s Supper therefore forecasts the time when we will eat with God in that manner once again. “The Lord’s Supper looks forward to a more wonderful fellowship meal in God’s presence in the future, when the fellowship of Eden will be restored and there will be even greater joy, because those who eat in God’s presence will be forgiven sinners now confirmed in righteousness, never able to sin again…From Genesis to Revelation, then God’s aim has been to bring his people into fellowship with himself, and one of the joys of experiencing that fellowship is the fact that we can eat and drink in the presence of the Lord.”

19 Peter J. Leithart, Blessed are the Hungry: Meditations on the Lord's Supper (Moscow: Canon Press, 2000), 15.


other portions of the canon to shed light on areas that are often neglected and yet are precisely what we need to sharpen our understanding of this Christ ordained meal. We have established that understanding the general significance of a meal in biblical thought gives us fresh insight into the Lord’s Supper. We have also seen the significance of the covenant meal, Passover meal, sacrificial meal and eschatological feast in relation to the Lord’s Supper. I am arguing that these particular meals in Scripture are crucial for better understanding what is happening at the Lord’s Table. We will now narrow the lens as we turn to a discussion of the Lord’s Supper restricted to the witness of the New Testament.

The Lord’s Supper and the New Testament

The purpose of this section is to survey the New Testament observing relevant texts that shape our understanding of the Lord’s Supper. First, we will look at the synoptic gospels comparing them and drawing out the main themes pertaining to this ordinance. Second, we will turn our attention to the Acts of the Apostles looking for the early church at practice regarding the Lord’s Supper. Third, we will shift our focus to John’s gospel and his letters for further perspective on the beginnings and practice of the supper. Fourth, we will move on to Paul’s important instructions on the Lord’s Supper to the church. Fifth, we will conclude this section with a glimpse into the general letters and draw from their contribution to the issue at hand.

The Synoptic Gospels

The three accounts of the institution of the Lord’s Supper are found in the synoptic gospels. It is helpful to view these accounts alongside each other in order to see the distinctive nuances of each writer. As has been discussed earlier all three writers place the supper in the context of a Passover meal. We will therefore pick up the
narrative where it transitions from the discussion of Passover preparation to the actual supper. I have italicized and highlighted phrases unique to Matthew and Luke.

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<td>And when it was evening he came with the twelve. And as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, ‘Truly, I say to you one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.’ They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, ‘Is it I?’ He said to them, ‘It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born.’ And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink it all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins. 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.</td>
<td>When it was evening, he reclined at the table with the twelve. And as they were eating, he said, ‘Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.’ And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, ‘Is it I Lord?’ He answered, ‘He who dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for him if he had not been born.’ Judas, who would betray him, answered, ‘Is it I, Rabbi?’ He said to him, ‘You have said so.’ Now as they were eating Jesus took the bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ And he took a cup and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed.’</td>
<td>And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, ‘I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, ‘Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.’ And he took the bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed.’</td>
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When these three texts are placed together and the larger context of each narrative is kept in mind, we begin to see that the gospels intersect with unified themes and also diverge with their own unique motifs.

**Giving and receiving.** The Gospel writers are agreed on the central details of this meal. As has been noted it was a covenant meal during Passover. The Gospel writers all record that Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it. In addition, Jesus took the cup, said thanks, and gave it. This is significant because it is the God-Man who...
resides over this meal. Jesus is the host of this dinner and the disciples are his guests. The disciples are recipients who receive the bread and cup and partake in both as a response to the giving of the Son. The Lord Jesus gives. The disciples receive. The prerogative of initiating a covenant belongs to a superior and in salvation history that superior has always been God himself. Here Jesus takes that role upon himself implicitly claiming deity.

The giving of the bread and cup, which are the symbols of participating in the new covenant point to the action necessary to inaugurate that covenant. The broken body and the shed blood of Christ are the substance of the symbols and therefore the means of establishing the new covenant. The reception of the bread and the cup is a reception of the death of Christ on our behalf for the forgiveness of sins. Christ breaks the bread. Christ gives the cup. We receive. God saves. We are saved. The meal communicates to us that salvation belongs to the Lord and in his kindness he confers that redemption upon us. There would be no covenant if he did not initiate it. There would be no salvation if Christ did not accomplish it. The glory of the covenants of Scripture, not least the new covenant, is the fact that God is in no way obligated to make them. The only promise we deserve from God is an eternity in hell. The wonder of the covenants in Scripture therefore is that God who is not obligated to save obligates himself to do just that! What grace there are in the words: “take eat and take drink!”

22 I. Howard Marshall, The Last Supper and The Lord’s Supper, 84-85. “It is important that the bread and wine are actually received by the disciples. The action indicates not merely the offering of a gift but the reception of a gift. By accepting what Jesus gave to them the disciples accepted the symbolical significance of the gift and thus gave their assent to the offer. Thus in due course the Lord’s Supper became a sign not simply of the offer of salvation but also of the reception of salvation.”
**New Covenant.** I have already argued that covenant is at the heart of the Lord’s Supper. To understand the Lord’s Supper we must have a grasp of what Jesus was referring to when he spoke of the new covenant. For the disciples when Jesus referred to the new covenant a multitude of texts may have entered their minds. Most likely one main text would have held pride of place: Jeremiah 31:31-34.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer

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23 Walter C. Kaiser Jr, "The old promise and the New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31-34," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 15. 1 (Winter 1972): 14. “The only place in the Old Testament where the expression ‘new covenant’ occurs is Jeremiah 31:31. However, it would appear that the idea is much more widespread. Based on similar content and contexts, the following expressions can be equated with the new covenant: the ‘everlasting covenant’ in seven passages (Jer 32:40; 50:5; Ezek 16:60; 37:26; Isa 24:5; 55:3; 61:8), a ‘new heart’ or a ‘new spirit’ in three or four passages (Ezek 11:19; 18:31; 36:26; Jer 32:39 (LXX)), the ‘covenant of peace’ in three passages (Isa 54:10; Ezek 34:25; 37:26), and ‘a covenant’ or ‘my covenant’ which is placed ‘in that day’ in three passages (Isa 42:6; 49:8; Hos. 2:18-20; Isa 59:21) — making a grand total of sixteen or seventeen major passages on the new covenant.”

24 Ibid, 14. Kaiser illustrates the centrality of Jeremiah 31 in understanding the new covenant. “Jeremiah 31:34 is the locus classicus on the subject. This may be validated from several lines of evidence. Firstly, the unique appearance of the word ‘new’ in this passage stimulated Origen to be the first to name the last 27 books of the Bible ‘The New Testament.’ Secondly, it was the largest piece of text to be quoted in extenso in the New Testament—Hebrews 8:8-12. The writer of Hebrews even partially repeats the same long quotation a few chapters later in 10:16-17. Thirdly, it was the subject of nine other New Testament texts: four dealing with the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:20; I Cor 11:25; Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24), three additional references in Hebrews (Heb. 9:15; 10:13; 12:24), and two passages in Paul dealing with "ministers of the new covenant" (2 Cor 3:6) and the future forgiveness of Israel's sins (Rom 11:27).”
shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For, I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Without entering into the discussion of continuity and discontinuity between the old covenant and new covenant I will make four observations of the text that are crucial for understanding the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. First, the new covenant provides a heart with the law written all over it. The external tablets of stone that characterized the old covenant are replaced with warm, beating hearts that yearn to do the will of God. Second, the new covenant is a promise that God will forever own his people and forever be their God. Third, the new covenant is a guarantee that all his people, big and small, will know him intimately. Fourth, the new covenant is a pledge that God will forgive iniquity and forever forget sin.

A second important text that illuminates and fills in Jeremiah 31 is Ezekiel 36:24-28.

I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people,


26 This is a promise that has characterized all the covenants but climaxes in the new covenant in ways unimaginable to recipients of the old covenants. See Gen 17:7, 8; 28:21; Ex 6:7; 29:45; Lev 11:45; 22:33; 25:38; 26:12, 44, 45; Num 15:41; Deut 4:20; 29:12-13; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:1; 31:33; 32:38; Ezek 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:27; Zech 8:8; 13:9.
and I will be your God.

Once again, some observations are in order. First, the new covenant promises a return to the land from which the Israelites were exiled. Second, the new covenant guarantees cleansing from all uncleanness. Third, the new covenant promises a needed heart surgery, which consists of the removal of a stone heart and the implantation of a flesh heart. Fourth, the new covenant is the promise that God’s Spirit will come to dwell in his people, which will result in careful obedience. Fifth, the new covenant is the promise that God will possess a people and that he will allow a people to possess him.27

How then do these observations of the new covenant inform our understanding of the Lord’s Supper? At the last supper Jesus taught his disciples that his death was the means of inaugurating this new covenant. The meal, which anticipated his death, therefore also anticipated the fulfillment of all the glorious promises contained in the new covenant. It was by means of Jesus’ death (and resurrection) that exiles would be brought home, sinners would be cleansed, hearts would be changed, iniquities would be forgiven, a people would be purchased, the Spirit would be given, and God would forever be with his people. To say the least, the last supper anticipated the long awaited hope of true Israel. From our place in history to participate in the Lord’s Supper is to look back upon the cross, experience the current realities of the new covenant, and look forward to the

27 John Calvin, Commentaries on Jeremiah (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 133. Calvin argues that this is the heart of the new covenant, “the main object of God’s covenant is, that he should become our Father, from whom we are to seek and expect salvation, and that we should also become his people.” Walter C. Kaiser Jr, "The old promise and the New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31-34," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 15. 1 (Winter 1972): 12. Kaiser agrees with Calvin and stresses also that this promise is one of the most important in all of Scripture, “the promise is actually God’s single all encompassing declaration which is repeated, unfolded and ultimately completed ‘in that day’ of our Lord.”
consummation of the new covenant. I will suspend the discussion of our experience of these three components of the Lord’s Supper until later in the paper.

**A Grateful Savior.** Jesus gives thanks to God for the bread and the cup that he gives the disciples. This is a profound detail of the Lord's Supper that is often overlooked as a rote meal-time prayer. But this is no regular meal and this is no regular thanks. "This is my body broken for you...This is my blood shed for you." This is what the Son of God gives thanks for. He gives thanks to the Father that his body will soon be crushed and that his blood will soon be spilled! Why? I would suggest at least three reasons. 1) Jesus delights to do his Father’s will and this is the main purpose for which he was sent (Jn 10:14-18). 2) Jesus knows that the Father will be exalted in him at the cross and that he himself will be exalted by the Father (Phil 2:6-11, Heb 12:2). 3) Jesus sees the eleven as a small representation of the great multitude that his death will purchase and he is thankful for what his death will accomplish (Rev 5:9, Is 53:10-11).28

Our Lord met the cross with thanksgiving. The breaking of bread and the pouring of wine did indeed signal death, but they did not signal defeat. This was not to be the "last supper." The gratitude of Christ and the hymn of praise sung at the end of the supper grant us a glorious picture of a worshipping Savior who knows that triumph comes through seeming defeat.29 He gave thanks to God about the coming victory for he knew he was about to take up his greatest weapon yet; the cross. We should by all means

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28 John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 205. It is possible that he partially experiences the satisfaction promised in Isaiah 53:10.

give thanks to the Lord when we participate in this meal but let us not forget to meditate upon the only thanksgiving explicitly given in the text. Thomas Watson urges this same gratitude in the Lord’s Supper based upon the gratefulness of Christ. “Christ gave thanks that God the Father had, in the infinite riches of his grace, given his Son to expiate the sins of the world. And if Christ gave thanks, how may we give thanks! If he gave thanks, who was to shed his blood, how may we give thanks, who are to drink it!”

**The Cup of Wrath.** In all three gospels the garden of Gethsemane follows on the heels of the last supper (Mk 14:32-42, Mt 26:36-46 Lk 22:39-46). Just as a cup played a central role in the supper narrative so it does in the garden narrative. The cause of Christ’s agony is the cup. The content of Christ’s three-fold petition regards the cup. The will of the Father is that Christ drink the cup. What is this cup? The cup that Jesus pleads the Father to take from him is none other than the cup of the Father’s wrath.

The Old Testament uses the metaphor of drinking the cup to portray absorbing God’s wrath, giving us the backdrop for understanding this narrative. A few texts will suffice to

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30 On a side-note Christ’s thankfulness in the face of suffering provides the model for how his followers are to respond in the face of suffering (cf. Acts 5:41).


32 Craig Blomberg, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 230. “The reason Paul, like the gospel writers calls it the ‘cup’ rather than using the word ‘wine’ is because the expression would evoke Old Testament associations of the suffering of the ‘cup’ of God’s wrath (Ps 75:8; Is 51:17). Christ’s shed blood demonstrated that he accepted the wrath we deserved to experience and so made possible for us peace with God.”

33 A.R. Millard, “Cup,” in *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J.D. Douglas (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers Inc, 1962), 255. “Throughout the Bible, cup is used figuratively as containing the share of blessings or disasters allotted to a man or nation or his divinely appointed fate.”
prove the point.

Wake yourself, wake yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the *cup of his wrath*, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering (Isa 51:17, italics mine).

Thus the Lord the God of Israel, said to me: ‘Take from my hand this *cup of the wine of wrath*, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it’ (Jer 25:15, italics mine).

This metaphor is also used elsewhere in the New Testament.

And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, ‘If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the *cup of his anger*, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb’ (Rev 14:9-10, italics mine).

These texts shed light on the heart of the matter in the garden of Gethsemane.

His anguish of soul and sweaty drops of blood were a result of the prospect of absorbing the infinite wrath of God the Father. So, what does this have to do with the Lord’s Supper? Just hours before Jesus pleads with the Father to take the cup from him he tells his disciples to take the cup he is giving them. The cup the disciples deserved to drink was the cup of wrath, but the cup they actually drank was the cup of salvation (Ps 116:13). How can this be? Jesus drank the cup of wrath in order that we might drink the cup of salvation, which is the cup of the new covenant. The cup of salvation from which we drink was preceded by a bitter cup of wrath. This we must never forget when we come to the Lord’s Table and we hold in our hands the cup of the new covenant.

34 See also Ezekiel 23:31-33

35 See also Revelation 16:19, 18:6

36 Psalm 116 was likely among the hallel psalms that were sung at the end of the meal referred to by both Mark and Matthew as a hymn. If this is accurate then there is a real link between the cup of the new covenant and the cup of salvation referred to in this psalm.
**Frail Participants.** Another thing that the gospel writers are unanimously agreed on is the fact that the recipients of this meal were weak, stumbling, sinful disciples. This can be illustrated from a few observations. First, the atmosphere of this meal is thick with betrayal. All three writers record that Judas betrayed Christ during the Lord’s Supper. Upon Jesus’ pronouncement that someone would betray him all the disciples revealed a deep sense of concern and sorrow (Matt 26:22). Second, the three gospels record the prediction of Peter’s denial in the context of the Last Supper. The remaining ten disciples join Peter in refuting the possibility of any of them denying their Master (Matt 26:35). Third, the gospel of Luke informs us that an argument about greatness in the kingdom broke out among the disciples at the Last supper (Lk 22:24-30).

We learn from these observations that there was only one kind of guest at the Lord’s Table: a sinful guest. Gilbert Ostdiek elaborates on this fact.

Why would the early communities for which the gospels were written have chosen to include this less than flattering portrait of the first disciples in their accounts of the supper? Exegetes commonly hold that the four gospels were written not simply as transcriptions of historical events, but as faith accounts told in such a way as to help the different communities reflect on the meaning of these events for their lives. Francis Moloney has argued that admission of broken and weak disciples to the table of the Lord is a thread that runs through each of the biblical accounts of the last supper, though altered to fit the circumstances of each community. These memories are enshrined precisely because the later disciples experienced themselves as did the first, prone to fail and in need of the strength and forgiveness this holy meal provides. From his study of New Testament materials Moloney concludes: ‘the Eucharist celebrates and proclaims the presence of Jesus to the broken.’

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John Calvin makes a similar point when he states, “let us remember that this sacred banquet is medicine to the sick, comfort to the sinner, alms to the poor.”\textsuperscript{40} On the flipside, the examples of betrayal and denial serve as a sober warning to us that we are capable of turning our backs on Christ, thus pushing us to rely on his grace. As Larry Hurtado notes, “The failure of Judas and the rest of the Twelve provokes in the readers a solemn commitment that they, after likewise eating at their Lord’s Table, should not fail him in times of testing as did the Twelve.”\textsuperscript{41}

**Fasting in Heaven.** We all know Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights prior to launching into public ministry. But this is not the only fast that is recorded about Jesus. The text of Scripture is plain that Jesus committed himself to a fast during the last supper, one that he has been practicing ever since. It is helpful to see the way Jesus’ statement is phrased in all three gospels:

- Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until…
  - that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God (Mk 14:25)
  - I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom (Matt 26:29)
  - the kingdom of God comes (Lk 22:18)

Jesus declares that he will restrain from drinking wine until the kingdom of God comes in fullness. Luke also tells us that Jesus committed himself to abstaining from the bread until “it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Lk 22:16). We know that the Bride of


of Christ expresses her longing for the return of the Bridegroom through fasting: “Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast (Matt 9:15, italics mine).” However, have we considered that the Bride is not the only one who fasts during this period of separation? The Bridegroom refrains from the celebratory bread and wine until that glorious day when his pure Bride will sit at table with him in his kingdom.

According to Larry Hurtado this phrase spoken by Christ “is a vow of abstinence, promising that he will not share in another festal cup until he has done the will of God and participates with his disciples in the joy of the consummated kingdom.”

In the Lamb’s Supper the fasting of the Bride and the Bridegroom will give way to eternal feasting. The longing for the consummation of the marriage celebrated in the wedding feast is not a one-sided affair. Christ the Bridegroom longs for his Bride and his refusal to partake of such a feast until they are together is proof that it is so.

**Soundings of the Lord’s Supper.** Do the gospel writers ever allude to the Lord’s Supper in other portions of their narratives? Some would argue that the Lord’s Supper is restricted to these specific texts and that there are no allusions elsewhere in the synoptic gospels. Others would argue that the authors have utilized the theme of the last supper in other parts of their gospels. In Mark there is a possible allusion to the last supper in the feeding of the five thousand. Some discern the same theme in Matthew’s version of the miracle.

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42 Ibid, 240.

Most significant is Luke’s portrayal of Christ’s post-resurrection appearance to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. After interpreting the scriptures to these two confused disciples he agrees to turn aside and become their guest and the next thing we know Jesus has become the host. “When he was at the table with them, he took the bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight” (Lk 24:30-31). A few verses later after the two disciples have joined the rest, we read: “Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of bread” (24:35). There are at least three arguments that support the view that this is a clear allusion to the last supper.

First, Luke takes pains in his two-volume series, Luke-Acts, to illustrate that the early church followed the Lord in obedience. The multiple examples of the breaking of bread in the book of Acts clearly refer to the Lord’s Supper and it is unlikely that Luke would have intended a different meaning for this phrase in his gospel. In this vein, Robert Stein notes that for

Luke these references to the ‘breaking of bread’ are understood as the fulfillment of Jesus’ command to ‘do this in remembrance of me’ found in his gospel. To interpret them as simply ordinary meals, or even as love feasts, would contradict Luke’s normal practice of showing how the church in Acts carried out Jesus’ teachings.\(^{45}\)

Second, in the Lord’s Supper and in this meal Jesus 1) blesses the bread, 2) breaks the bread, and 3) gives the bread. The near parallel wording strongly suggests the link.\(^{46}\) Third, the revelation that immediately follows the breaking of bread may be


\(^{46}\) Craig L. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus’ meal with sinners*, 158.
Luke’s way of showing the importance of the meal in communicating that the Christ can only be apprehended in light of his suffering. This is further supported by the statement of the two disciples that Christ “was made known to them in the breaking of the bread” (Lk 24:35).  

If it is appropriate to understand this text in Luke as an allusion to the Lord’s Supper, which I have argued it is, then there are some implications regarding the supper that can be drawn from this passage. The Lord’s Supper is a revelatory meal. It is a meal that opens eyes and increases understanding. The meal accompanied by the Word of God helps us understand the gospel by causing us to set our eyes upon our crucified King. The supper brings us back to the cross and therefore back to the heart of the gospel. For the Christian the light of knowledge comes in the dark shadow of a bloody cross.

“This passage narrates the first act of breaking bread after the Last Supper and thus fulfills Jesus’ command to perform the ceremony in remembrance of him.”

Robert Letham, *The Lord's Supper: Eternal Word in Broken Bread*, 16. “Jesus is immediately recognized in his supper…It is his supper, he presides, he makes himself known.”


Craig L. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' meal with sinners*, 159. Quoting Robert Stein Blomberg states, “Luke sought to convey to Theophilus and his readers that as certainty came to the disciples in the sharing of Scripture and the ‘breaking of bread,’ so too could they experience this certainty as they heard the Scriptures in the context of the church’s breaking bread.”

I. Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper*, 124-125. “So far as the present story is concerned, the breaking of bread revealed the identity of the stranger who was visibly present with them…The disciples experienced Jesus as the risen Lord both in the exposition of the Scriptures to them and in his breaking of the bread to them, and Luke intends his readers to see that these two things belong together.”
We have seen multiple themes drawn from the synoptic Gospels that enhance our understanding of the significance of the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s Supper is a new covenant meal that is enacted on the basis of the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ. In this meal God symbolizes the new covenant provision of reconciliation, forgiveness, and necessary transformation to frail sinners who have nothing to give and everything to receive. We are astonished to see a grateful Savior hosting a meal that represents his own demise and equally amazed to see his intense love for his purchased bride illustrated in his chosen fast.

The Acts of the Apostles

The book of Acts, being the second of a two-volume set, must be read with Luke’s gospel in mind. When Luke refers to the breaking of bread, which he does so five times in Acts, he is consistently indicating that the early church is obeying the command to remember Christ’s death in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.


And they devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions, and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

This text describes the character, priorities, and devotion of the early church. Strikingly the Lord’s Supper is among the four major activities that both define the church and shape its devotion.\textsuperscript{51} If this were the only other text on the Lord’s Supper in

the New Testament outside the gospels it would be sufficient to teach us that this supper
must be a priority in Christ’s church. It is significant that the same devotion given to
God’s Word, fellowship, and prayer is reserved also for Lord’s Supper. This text stands
as a rebuke to our unbiblical demotion of the Lord’s Supper and calls us to elevate it once
again to its proper place in the church.

The second reference to “breaking bread” in this text reveals where, when and
how the early church participated in the Lord’s Supper. First, believers met in homes
together and in the midst of a meal they participated in the Lord’s Supper. This made
for an intimate setting where the meal would have been characterized by fellowship.
Second, at this stage of development the early church participated daily in these meals.
The significance of the meal can be seen in its prevalence. Third, the early church
received the Lord’s Supper with joy-filled hearts full of praise and sincerity.

To say the least, the Lord’s Supper played a central role in the life of the early

that this text should be understood not as four separate activities, but as “four constituent
parts of an early Christian gathering.” If this is the way to interpret the verse the
significance of the Lord’s Supper is not diminished but possibly heightened.

52 F.F. Bruce, "The Church of Jerusalem," Christian Brethren Research
taking of bread and wine in remembrance of their Lord. [It] appears to have been a daily
practice, taking place in the course of a fellowship meal, in [their] homes.”

suggests the frankness and openness of spirit that characterized the early Christian
meal is a scriptural picture for the enjoyment of salvation in terms of communion with
the Lord. Such an experience, already vouchsafed to his people, must inevitably lead to
the expression of joyfulness and praise to God...The New Testament does not appear to
associate sorrow or mourning over the death of Jesus with the celebration of the Supper.
The Supper was not an occasion for mourning over his death, but rather for rejoicing in
his presence and giving thanks for the benefits procured by his death.”
church. It was an expression of both corporate worship and fellowship marked by rejoicing and gratitude. It functioned to center the community on the heart of their faith: the cross of Christ. It served to foster intimate relationships within the body of Christ. And, it was a means of grace whereby Christians were strengthened for service.

Acts 20:7-12.

On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered. And a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer. And being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. But Paul went down and bent over him, and taking him in his arms, said, ‘Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.’ And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed. And they took the youth away alive, and were not a little comforted.

Three things are noteworthy in this text. First, the text says that the express purpose of the gathering was to participate in the Lord’s Supper. Second, the “breaking of bread” in this congregation was practiced once a week on what became known as the Lord’s Day. Third, the exposition of Scripture accompanied the Lord’s Supper. It is significant that the gathering centered on the Lord’s Supper and that in this context the Scriptures were opened for edification. In other words, the supper was not an add-on


55 John R. Stott, The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Acts, 321. “The word and sacrament were combined in the ministry given to the church at Troas and the universal church has followed suit ever since. For God speaks to his people through his Word both as it is read and expounded from Scripture and as it is dramatized in the two
bringing up the tail of the gathering. The text also illustrates that the frequency of participation in this ordinance in the early church was somewhat fluid.56

**Acts 27:33-38.**

As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, ‘Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you.’ And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.) And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea.

It is plain why the Eucharistic overtones in this passage are debated. Is Paul actually presiding over the Lord’s Supper with a group of pagan sailors as recipients? How could this be consistent with the rest of the New Testament regarding the Lord’s Supper? Many have argued that Luke does not have in mind the Lord’s Supper since from their perspective it would contradict the rest of the New Testament teaching.57

It is arguable, however, that the “four action shape of the Eucharist,” which is the taking, blessing, breaking, and eating of the bread is unmistakable in this passage of Scripture.58 Along these lines Geoffrey Wainwright has argued that this was the Lord’s Supper.

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gospel sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”

56 Weekly participation here in this text (see also 1 Cor 11:17-18) versus daily participation in other texts (Acts 2:46). However, it could also be argued that they were also meeting together daily in homes to take the meal.

57 John R. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Acts*, 392. “Neither the occasion nor the gathering of unbelieving soldiers, sailors and prisoners was appropriate for this.”

Those on board a ship running on the rocks (27:29) were confronted by ‘the last things’: it was a matter of life and death, both physically and, for the heathen, spiritually. The possibility should not be excluded that when the apostle proposed they should all take food, telling them, ‘This will be the saving of you’ (27:34) and having already announced to them that their destiny was in the hands of his God whose will it was that there should be no loss of life among them (27:21-26), he then celebrated for them the meal that is life to all who will choose life.  

This discussion is in no way conclusive, but at the very least we must take into account the possibility of this meal being the Lord’s Supper. However, due to the difficulty of being certain about this interpretation little should be built upon our understanding of the Lord’s Supper from such a text.

We have seen that the Lord’s Supper loomed large over the life of the early Christian community. The Lord’s Supper was among the major distinguishing marks of the church and was seen in itself at times as a purpose for gathering. The supper was accompanied by the Word of God and was a means of strengthening grace to the participants. The supper was seen as a celebration marked by joy, gratefulness, and sincerity. The early church’s participation in the supper was frequent yet flexible. In short, the church in Acts was devoted to the Lord’s Supper and as result they reaped great benefit.

The Gospel and Letters of John

The Last Supper is curiously missing from the gospel of John. However, John contributes to our understanding by giving us details that surrounded the meal which are absent from the synoptics. The entire upper room discourse (Jn 13-17) instructs

59 Ibid.

us on what went on at the Last Supper. I would suggest that John’s gospel sheds light on the Lord’s Supper in three main ways. First, John describes a foot-washing ceremony that preceded the supper (Jn 13:1-20). In this humble act Jesus taught the necessity of servant hood and the need for cleansing. One writer has suggested that the cleansing spoken of and symbolized by Christ in this ceremony were necessary to participate in the Lord’s Supper that followed. Along with the truth that cleansing is necessary to partake of the Lord’s meal is the fact that this ceremony places the Lord’s Supper in the context of serving one another.

Second, John fills us in on the content of the conversation at the Lord’s Table. It is in the upper room discourse that some of the most intimate and powerful words ever spoken were done so across the Lord’s Table. Jesus spoke of his coming glorification (Jn 13:31-32), his going to the Father (Jn 13:33-14:1-4), his preparation of a place for his disciples (Jn 14:1-5), his promise to return to get them (Jn 14:3, 18), his intimacy with the Father and the Spirit (Jn 14:6-31), and his giving of the Holy Spirit that would follow his death and resurrection (14:16, 26-27; 15:26-27; 16:7-11). He warned his disciples of the

Marshall, Last Supper and Lord’s Supper, 133-139.

61 Robin Routledge, "Passover and Last Supper," 210-211. “Following the Kiddush, it was the usual practice for participants in the meal to wash their hands before touching the food. Jesus went further when he rose from the table and proceeded to wash his disciples' feet (Jn 13:1-16). Ritual washing was an important preliminary to eating; through it the participants prepared themselves for the meal. By doing what he did at this point in the service, Jesus pointed to the fact that true cleansing, and the only means by which his followers could be properly prepared to enjoy all that the Passover signifies, was through him. Washing the feet of the guests at the meal was an example of humble service, which Jesus expected his disciples to follow (Jn 13:12-15), and stood in sharp contrast to the disciples' pre-occupation with which of them was the greatest (Lk 22:24).”

62 It is noteworthy that some of the topics of conversation, specifically the reception of the Holy Spirit and the promise to take the disciples to be with him, are
hatred and persecution that would come upon them from the world along with the need to persevere to the end (Jn 15:18-16:4). He reminded them what love for God looked like and he encouraged them about his love for them (Jn 13:34-35, 14:21-24, 15:1-17). He instructed them on prayer and the need to continually put their faith in him (Jn 14:12-14, 15:1-11). He acknowledged the reality of their grief and promised them fullness of joy (Jn 16:16-24). And after he had spoken such things to them he prayed for them (Jn 17:1-26). One implication for our practice of the Lord’s Supper is that it is a time for deep, meaningful conversation that focuses in upon our Triune God and our lives of faith.

Third, John gives us further insight into the atmosphere of the Last Supper. He too includes the betrayal of Judas and the forewarning of Peter’s denial (Jn 13:21-30, 36-38). He also includes the great sorrow that filled the hearts of the disciples as they listened to Jesus tell them of his coming departure (Jn 16:16-24). Jesus, however, calls upon them to rejoice in what is coming as a result of his death and to place their hope in his future return (Jn 16:5-24). Jesus informs his disciples that he is speaking to them for their joy, peace, and perseverance (Jn 15:11, 16:1, 33). At the Lord’s Supper, therefore, we should be realistic about grief and pain in this world and stir our hearts to hope in the

expositions of what will occur as a result of bringing in the new covenant. The coming of the Holy Spirit spoken of here in John is a new covenant promise. Jesus was therefore explaining, in part, the benefits of the new covenant that he was on the verge of inaugurating.

63 Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2004), 1. Letham records this quote from Sinclair Ferguson on the content of the upper room discourse. “I’ve often reflected on the rather obvious thought that when the disciples were about to have the world collapse in on them, our Lord spent so much time in the Upper Room speaking to them about the mystery of the Trinity. If anything could underline the necessity of Trinitarianism for practical Christianity, that must surely be it!”
future return of Christ, which in turn produces joy, peace, and perseverance.

Outside of the contribution of the upper room discourse many have argued that John 6, which is the discussion of the bread of life along with the eating and drinking of Jesus’ flesh, is a reference to the Lord’s Supper. Louis Berkhof is one such proponent. He believes that at the supper we symbolically eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus “symbolically appropriat[ing] the benefits secured by the sacrificial death of Christ.”

Although this is true and may be extrapolated from John 6 it remains unclear whether or not John had the Eucharist in view. It seems wise to remain tentative in building too much on a theology of the Lord’s Supper from this text.

The other text in John that contains a possible allusion to the Lord’s Supper is found in Revelation. The letter to Laodicea is a stinging rebuke motivated by Christ’s love to bring this self-sufficient congregation to repentance. Their proud disposition endangers them being vomited out of the Savior’s mouth. Christ’s command of zealous repentance is followed by this remarkable phrase: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:20).

It seems that the call to repentance and the supper invitation are synonymous.

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66 John Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), 346-348. Piper refutes the abuses of seeing the Eucharist in these words and understanding them literally as many have throughout church history.
Repentance is expressed by this corporate congregation in first acknowledging that they have removed Christ from their midst and second by inviting him to come in once again that they might share an intimate dinner. What meal could Jesus be referring to? Vern Poythress argues that the Lord’s Supper is in view. “He promises to eat with them, alluding to the fellowship with Christ expressed in the Lord’s Supper.” John Stott agrees with Poythress, but also argues for an interpretation that includes individual fellowship with Christ as well as corporate. “Of this inward festive meal the Lord’s Supper is the outward and visible sacrament. To eat bread and drink wine is but a physical representation of the spiritual feast with Christ.”

If this text is to be viewed as referring to the Lord’s Supper, then there are some important implications for our study. First, the Lord’s Supper is an extremely intimate meal that Christ desires to eat with his church. Second, the Lord’s Supper is here viewed as a meal of reconciliation. Christ invites his bride to repentance and forgiveness through a meal that signifies how that forgiveness is possible. These points are made with the cautious recognition that this interpretation of the text is not certain.

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68 John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 121. So also Robert Letham, *The Lord's Supper: Eternal Word in Broken Bread*, 16. “Christ has been shut out of the church by neglect and self-satisfaction on the part of the members. He asks for readmittance, having warned earlier about the dire consequences of the status quo. An allusion to the Eucharist is more than likely. If so, Christ speaks of it in terms of fellowship, very close to the idea of communion about which Paul wrote.”


70 Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary on the New*
The Pauline Letters

Paul addresses the topic of the Lord’s Supper only twice and both instances are found in 1 Corinthians. Paul’s treatment of the Lord’s Supper is thoroughly pastoral in that it comes as instruction to a church that is abusing the ordinance and needs to be reminded of both the meaning and appropriate practice of the Lord’s Supper. We will look at both texts in turn. The first passage is found in 1 Corinthians 10:16-22.

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. 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. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

The first thing that is noteworthy is that this meal is the Lord’s meal. Paul identifies the table as the “table of the Lord” and the cup as the “cup of the Lord.” Jesus continues to be the host of this meal and we the guests.71 When we come to the supper we sit at his table and eat of his provision. Second, Paul explains that the cup and the bread signal and enrich our ongoing participation in the benefits of Christ’s saving work on our behalf.72 Third, the original form of the last supper is preserved in the blessing of the cup


71 Thomas Watson, The Lord’s Supper 60. Watson says that Jesus is “both the founder and the feast.”

and the breaking of the bread.\textsuperscript{73} Fourth, Paul emphasizes that the vertical dimension of the Lord’s Supper is not the only significant dimension. The one loaf of bread points us to the one body that we are a part of through our union with Christ. Participation in the benefits of Christ death is our rallying point and therefore unity and fellowship in the church are essential to the meaning of this meal. Fifth, loyalty to Christ is prerequisite to participation in his supper. Jesus will not tolerate double-minded men who sit at his table one day and at the devil’s the next.\textsuperscript{74} We have seen the joy of sitting at the Lord’s Table, but here we begin to see the solemnity of being the table guest of the exalted Christ.

The second and most significant text in Paul, which is also the most detailed exposition of the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament is found in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he

\textsuperscript{73} Note also the preservation of the one cup and one loaf.

\textsuperscript{74} F.F. Bruce, \textit{The New Century Bible Commentary: 1-2 Corinthians}, ed. Ronald E. Clements and Matthew Black (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 96. “[Paul] is thinking of feasts which are explicitly under the patronage of a pagan deity, involving in some degree the acknowledgment and even worship of that deity.”
Whose, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another— if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come.

This passage can be divided into three major sections: 1) The abuse of the Lord’s Supper, 2) The tradition of the Lord’s Supper, and 3) Warning about further abuse of the Lord’s Supper.  

What exactly was the abuse of the Lord’s Supper at Corinth? It’s quite simple; the wealthy were neglecting the poor. Craig Blomberg elaborates on the problem.

The minority of well-to-do believers (1:26), including the major financial supporters and owners of the homes in which the believers met, would have had the leisure-time and resources to arrive earlier and bring larger quantities and finer food than the rest of the congregation. Latecomers would be seated separately in the adjacent atrium of courtyard. Those that could not afford to bring a full meal, or a very good one, did not have the opportunity to share with the rest in the way that Christian unity demanded.

Instead of sharing with the poor, the rich were gorging and inebriating themselves. Paul is emphatic: this is not the Lord’s Supper. By their actions they were actually despising the church of Christ and making a mockery of the Lord’s Supper.

Paul grounds this rebuke in the tradition of the Lord’s Supper that was passed down to you.

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77 Peter J. Leithart, *Blessed are the Hungry: Meditations on the Lord's Supper*, 38, “They were grumbling at thanksgiving, burning the flag on the 4th of July.”
him. Paul’s point is that the meal they were celebrating was not the meal that was passed down to him and bequeathed to them. Paul rounds off the passage with an exhortation, flowing from the tradition he has just explained, to self-examination lest they continue to partake of the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner and face the severe discipline of God.

Now that we have seen the flow of Paul’s thought we will focus on the themes that emerge from this text that bring greater clarity to our understanding of the Lord’s Supper.

**A Commanded Memory.** “Do this in remembrance of me” is an imperative that only occurs in Luke’s gospel and here again in Paul. Why a commanded institution to keep us from forgetting our Lord and his cross? Because our most profound need as Christians is to keep Christ and his cross ever before us! How prone we are to wander, how quick we are to forget our Christ, how often we fail to remember the cross and what it means for us. The Lord’s Supper is about the gospel and as such it proclaims to our

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78 W. Harold Mare, *The Expositors Bible Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 259. “Using the technical words relating to ‘receiving’ and ‘passing on’ the tradition, he says he ‘received’ (parelabon) the ceremony of the Lord’s Supper from (apo) the Lord…Paul received the words of the institution of the Supper through it being passed on through others just as he then passed them on to the Corinthians.”

79 “Do this” in the Greek text is imperatival (poiete). “In remembrance of me” is either the manner in which the command is obeyed or the purpose for the command. The “this” in the text grammatically refers back to the bread, but theologically the whole of the Lord’s Supper is remembrance. See also the discussion of this command by I. Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord’s Supper*, 89-91.

80 John H. Armstrong, “Introduction: Do this in Remembrance of Me,” in *Understanding Four Views on the Lord’s Supper*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 11. “How odd it is that we Christians need to be reminded by a simple and recurring meal. We have been redeemed through the precious blood of our Messiah, Jesus, yet we are prone to forget his great act of sacrifice. But our Lord understands
hearts afresh exactly what frail forgetful sinners desperately need.

The call to remember God’s great redemptive acts has been an important part of the faith of God’s people throughout biblical history. The Israelites were to never forget God’s mighty intervention that delivered them from Egypt.\(^{81}\) The constant summons to remember along with the Passover meal was intended to keep the work of God in the memory of Israel.\(^{82}\) In the Lord’s Supper we the people of God remember God’s greatest work of redemption.\(^{83}\) It provokes us to think on our nail-pierced Savior and the benefits of his atoning sacrifice.

**A Purchased People.** Though we have witnessed a repeated emphasis on the Lord’s Supper as a corporate meal for God’s people this text teaches that this meal is also intensely personal. Jesus said, “This is my body, which is *for you.*”\(^{84}\) At this table we sit perfectly well our weakness and thus made provision for us to come again and again to his table so that we do not forget.”

\(^{81}\) Deut 5:15, 7:18, 11:2-4, 15:15, 16:12, 24:18, 22.

\(^{82}\) Melvin Tinker, "The Last Supper/Lord's Supper: More than a Parable in Action?," *Themelios* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 21. Quoting Allan Stibbs Tinker writes, “the Greek word for anamnesis expresses the idea of calling to mind, a recalling or recollection exactly similar to the way in which the Jews at the celebration of the Passover recalled their deliverance from Egypt. To the Semitic mind thus to commemorate a past event was personally to realize and experience its present operative significance as one event with abiding consequences.”

\(^{83}\) William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 963. “It was the desire of our Lord that by means of the supper, here instituted, the church should remember the sacrifice and love him, should reflect on that sacrifice and embrace him by faith, and should look forward in living hope to his glorious return.”

\(^{84}\) In Luke’s gospel the phrase is “given for you” (Lk 22:19). Although the pronoun “you” is a genitive plural each individual was to recognize that he was singularly purchased by God and brought into the corporate body of the redeemed. The church can be spoken of as being purchased of God because the individual members have been purchased (1 Cor 6:20, Acts 20:28).
and we recall being purchased by God through Christ. We think of our state prior to being owned by God. We consider the tremendous price of our purchase. We meditate upon the wonder of being the possession of God. There are few things sweeter than being the property of God himself. Richard Baxter knew this well. He states, “Let it exceedingly please you to think that you are wholly his: it being much better for you, as to your safety, honour, and happiness, than to be your own, or any’s else.” The Lord’s Supper aids us in learning this priceless yet most expensive truth.

**A Meal that Speaks.** After Paul has recalled the tradition passed down to him he gives one of many reasons why we participate in the Lord’s Supper: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” We eat the meal because the gospel of God is preached in and through it. F.F. Bruce states,

The memorial act is indeed a ‘visible word,’ an acted affirmation of the communicants interest in the Saviour’s blood; but the verb [proclaim] cannot be satisfied by anything less than a public narration of the death of Christ…The Eucharist, like the preaching of the gospel, in which Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified’ (Gal 3:1), was thus a powerful factor in the early crystallizing of the passion story in a form recognizable in all four gospels.

For whom is this ‘public narration’ of the death of Christ? Because the Lord’s Supper belongs to the church the gospel is therefore being proclaimed to the people of God. But, is not gospel proclamation for the lost? Indeed it is and the Lord’s Supper may aid in bringing the lost to faith. However, that is not the primary purpose of this

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86 The word for proclaimed (katangellete) is often you used in connection with the preaching of the gospel (1 Cor 9:14, Rom 1:8, Phil 1:19).


This is a significant point for it reinforces the fact that the gospel is the lifeblood of the church. The church is a people of the cross receiving the gospel again and again not merely by word and exposition, but also by bread and wine. As we sit at the Lord’s Table the supper set before us speaks to us. It tells us of enemies reconciled, orphans adopted, sinners purchased, criminals declared righteous, and of a whore transformed into a beautiful bride. In short, it tells us of God’s unsearchable grace expressed toward us in Christ. It is no wonder the early church was in the habit of daily receiving this gospel meal!

**Drinking Judgment.** If the text in 1 Corinthians 10, which we previously looked at, whispered about the gravity of sitting at the Lord’s Table this text shouts it.

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89 Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Volume 1: An humble inquiry into the rules of the Word of God, concerning the qualifications requisite to a complete standing and full communion in the visible Christian Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Inc, 1834), 472. Edwards addresses this objection for barring unbelievers from the table: “The Lord’s Supper has a proper tendency to promote men’s conversion, being an affecting representation of the greatest and most important things of God’s word; it has a proper tendency to awaken and humble sinners; here being a discovery of the terrible anger of God for sin, by the infliction of the curse upon Christ, when sin was imputed to him; and the representation here made of the dying love of Christ has a tendency to draw the hearts of sinners from sin to God.” His response to this strong point is as follows, “Unless it be an evident truth, that what the Lord’s Supper may have tendency to promote, the same it was appointed to promote, nothing follows from this argument.” In a previous section Edwards argues persuasively that the supper belongs to the believer and that it is a solemn profession of his faith (458-460). One of the primary purposes of the Lord’s Supper therefore is gospel preaching to the church. The evangelistic function of the Lord’s Supper is inherent and effective for it is a gospel meal, but in terms of intended function the supper is for the building up of the church.

90 Thomas Watson, *The Lord's Supper* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1665), ix. “A sacrament is a visible sermon. And herein the sacrament excels the Word preached. The Word is a trumpet to proclaim Christ, the sacrament is a glass to represent him…The Lord condescends to our weakness…God, to help our faith, does not only give us an audible Word, but a visible sign.”
How serious is eating the Lord’s Supper? Life and death Paul tells us. To participate in this meal in an unworthy manner is to invite judgment from the hand of God. Paul tells us that many who have partaken in this manner are weak and ill, and some have even died. If we are to approach this table appropriately and safely we must not minimize the solemn truth that God has put men to death for abusing his meal. Will we take lightly a meal where Christian people, like you and me, have met their end for eating and drinking inappropriately? God is utterly serious about this meal and we can be no less. Our lives depend on it.

**Body Discernment.** In order to keep the Corinthians from incurring God’s judgment, he calls on them to examine themselves before they participate in the Lord’s Supper. This self-examination is tightly linked to discerning the body of Christ. I. Howard Marshall explains two possible interpretations for understanding this discernment.

Either Paul is saying that people who eat unworthily are not recognizing that the food symbolizes the body (and blood) of Jesus or acting as befits recipients of his

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91 Alan R. Millard, *Covenant and Communion in First Corinthians*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970), 243-245. Millard argues that understanding both the blessings and consequences present in other covenants helps us understand this covenant meal. “Proclamation of the Lord’s death, which was the solemnizing of the New Covenant, implies acceptance of its consequences.” And again, “Each time the Corinthian Christians shared the Lord’s Supper they purported to show their allegiance to the covenant it symbolized, and therefore could not but expect its provisions to be active upon them for good or for ill.”

92 On a side-note this text reveals the severe kindness of God. Paul tells us that the taking of life from the Christian for his sin at the table is not a judgment of condemnation, but one of discipline. The loss of life is to hinder the loss of eternal life. God will not lose any that he has purchased therefore he will take their life if necessary to keep them from perishing. It is noteworthy that the most severe form of discipline, namely death, comes as a result of messing with the meal of the Lord. This in itself shows the significance of this meal.
salvation, or he is saying that they are failing to recognize that the people gathered together for the meal are present as the body of Christ (made one by sharing in the loaf, 1 Cor 10:17) and must be treated in Christian love. Schreiner argues that both may be in view.

One who treats fellow believers poorly fails to discern that they are members of Christ’s church, his body. One may also fail to discern the significance of Christ’s death since by his death he created a people; and therefore one who mistreats fellow believers at the Lord’s Supper reveals that he has little understanding of why Christ died.

Paul is therefore calling for self-examination that considers relationships with others in the body of Christ and the significance of what is represented in the meal. It seems, however, that the context of 1 Corinthians 11 places the stress on relationships in the body since this is the primary reason Paul is reproving them. Blomberg also argues this point by illustrating the appropriate application of self-examination from the text.

The Eucharist should be a time of self-examination, not so much for past sins, though repentance from them is always appropriate. Rather, Christians should consider their present attitudes toward those more needy than themselves. This would lead a radically different group of people who ought to refrain from the Lord’s Supper than usually appears. All repentant sinners are welcome, no matter how far away from God they may have recently felt. All professing believers who are unprepared to give generously of their wealth to help the poor in their midst, or who treat people of lower classes as second-class citizens, or who simply remain unreconciled with fellow celebrants, should refrain.

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95 Craig Blomberg, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 234-235. So also F.F. Bruce, *The New Century Bible Commentary: 1-2 Corinthians*, 115. “In the word of institution ‘this is my body’ he sees a reference not merely—perhaps not even primarily to Jesus’ ‘body of flesh,’ but to the corporate unity of all who share his life: ‘we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread’ (10:17). But for certain members of the church to eat and drink their fill, in un-brotherly disregard of their poorer fellow-Christians, as some were doing in Corinth, was to eat and drink without discerning the body, without any consideration for the most elementary implications of their
The import of this truth moves us away from imbalanced individualism to a healthy perspective on the Lord’s Supper that considers the individual in relation to the whole. Ironically in this context self-examination is actually about how you treat others. Thus it seems in the text that self-examination and discerning the body are nearly synonymous. When we self-examine we are asking ourselves, “How have I been as a hand to the body? Have I loved and served my other members? Have I damaged them? Have I given where there is need? Have I viewed them as Christ does? Do I need to restore any breaches I have made?” The examination is not about trying to discern the deepest darkest chasms of our own sinfulness, per say, but it is about asking the simple question: Have I loved my neighbor?96

We have seen that Paul’s contribution to our understanding of the Lord’s Supper is substantial. He has shown us that the Lord’s Supper is among God’s chosen vehicles to proclaim to us the gospel lest we forget the Christ and his cross. He has left an indelible imprint on our minds of the fact that it is a dangerous privilege to approach the table and partake of such weighty things. He has given reproof and instruction on the abuses of the Lord’s Supper that bring swift retribution and the appropriate steps to be

fellowship in Christ.” Thus, “the context implies that his self-examination will be specially directed to ascertaining whether or not he is living and acting in ‘love and charity’ with his neighbors.”

96 Blomberg, The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians, 238-239. “Paul’s warning against profaning the Lord’s Supper and incurring God’s wrath are consistently applied to the wrong situations. People are made to feel that they should abstain if they have not felt close to God recently or if they have been particularly disobedient, of if they have not achieved a certain level of Christian maturity, no matter how much they are prepared to repent and grow. Instead pastors should caution their congregations against partaking if they are unwilling to be generous in helping the poor in their midst, or if they remain un-reconciled with a fellow-Christian over some interpersonal dispute or squabble.”
taken to avoid such a fate. He has drawn out more than any other author in the New Testament that the Lord’s Supper is concerned with community.

**The General Letters**

The only relevant text remaining in the New Testament for our purposes is found in Jude 12. The author is writing to refute false teachers and in passing he states that these deceivers are “blemishes at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear.” It is likely that the love feast was either the context in which the Lord’s Supper was taken or it was actually another title for the supper. I. Howard Marshall opts for the latter. “There is nothing to suggest that the love feast was a separate kind of meal from the Lord’s Supper, and it seems more probable that these were two different names for the same occasion.” If this is accurate then this text would reinforce that the Lord’s Supper must be thought about in terms of a meal. However, nothing is conclusive from this text and therefore we must not give it too much weight in the formulation of our theology of the Lord’s Supper.

**The Lord’s Supper and Contemporary Application**

The aim of this section is to address how what we have seen from redemptive history and the New Testament should inform our present perspective and practice of the Lord’s Supper. We will first look at the issue of our perspective of the Lord’s Supper and then move to our practice of the Lord’s Supper.

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97 Curtis Vaughan and Thomas D. Lea, *Bible Study Commentary: 1,2 Peter, Jude* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 222.

Our Perspective of the Lord’s Supper.

I would suggest that our perspective on the Lord’s Supper, informed by what we have previously seen, should be understood under the rubric of new covenant. The new covenant must be the controlling principle in our understanding of this ordinance. Every facet of the Lord’s Supper must be brought underneath the lamp of the new covenant to be properly perceived. When we come to the Lord’s Table we come to eat the solemn meal of the new covenant. 99

Further, the Lord’s Supper itself directs us to perceive the new covenant it represents on a historical continuum. In other words, this ordinance would have us look at the past, present, and future. It directs us to look back on the inauguration of the new covenant, to recognize the present realities of the new covenant of which we are beneficiaries, and to turn our attention forward with expectation to the future consummation of the new covenant.

This important dynamic of historical continuum in understanding the Lord’s Supper should be thought of in relation to another dynamic in this ordinance: the call for...

99 Jonathan Edwards, The Works of Jonathan Edwards Volume 1: An humble inquiry into the rules of the Word of God, concerning the qualifications requisite to a complete standing and full communion in the visible Christian Church, 458-459. “There is in the Lord’s supper a mutual profession of the two parties transacting the covenant of grace, and visibly united in that covenant…Christ, by the speeches and actions of the minister, makes a solemn profession of his part in the covenant of grace: he exhibits the sacrifice of his body broken and his blood shed; and in the minister’s offering the sacramental bread and wine to the communicants, Christ presents himself to the believing communicants, as their propitiation and bread of life; and by these outward signs confirms and seals his sincere engagement to be their Saviour and food, and to impart to them all the benefits of his propitiation and salvation. And they in receiving what is offered, and eating and drinking the symbols of Christ’s body and blood, also profess their part in the covenant of grace: they profess to embrace the promises and lay hold of the hope set before them, to receive the atonement, to receive Christ as their spiritual food, and to feed upon him in their hearts by faith.”
vertical and horizontal perspective. The Lord’s Supper beckons us to focus our gaze primarily on God and on our neighbor. Thus as we look at past, present, and future in light of the new covenant so we focus our attention upward toward God and outward toward neighbor. We will consider each of these dynamics in turn.

**Looking Back: The inauguration of the new covenant.** The disciples at the last supper anticipated the inauguration of the new covenant. As for us, we look back on that inaugural work. As we have seen, the new covenant was the promise of promises foretold by the prophets. Jesus told us that the bread and the cup represented the horrific death he died *in order* to secure for us the promises of the new covenant. At the Lord’s Supper we worship our Lord for his costly love. We bring to mind his infinite condescension, we recall how he absorbed God’s wrath as a substitute, we relish in his triumph over sin and death, we marvel at his forgiveness, and we drink of his bottomless grace.

The fact that we do this illustrates that we are beneficiaries of what he died to secure! Only recipients of God’s grace drink deeply of that grace. Only those who have received forgiveness are filled with gratitude for such clemency. Only those who have the immutable hope of conquering death relish in the victory of Christ. Only those who have

100 Larry W. Hurtado, *The New International Biblical Commentary: Mark*, 236. “In the original situation of Jesus and the Twelve, the sharing of the bread and wine anticipated the death of Jesus, but Mark’s readers partook of the Lord’s Supper looking back at the death of Jesus. Nevertheless, for these readers sharing the Lord’s Supper signified their inclusion into the fellowship begun with the twelve, and it was still the Lord’s Supper.”

101 Russel D. Moore, *Understanding Four Views on the Lord’s Supper*, 33. “…the Supper is a victory lap—announcing the triumph of Christ over the powers of sin, death and Satan.”
been released from the electric chair and have seen Christ sit in their stead adore him for being their substitute. In other words, as recipients of the new covenant we look back with gratitude on the cross where our redemption was secured. We who deserve punishment have been promised paradise by means of the death of Christ.

The foundation of every mercy we have received from God is the cross of his Son. Present and future hope is nonexistent lest there is a cross in the past with Christ on it in our place. The Lord’s Supper centers on the cross and is therefore a loud declaration that the Crucified Christ is our only hope. In this institution God graciously directs our attention to the fountainhead of our salvation. Sitting at God’s table can only mean one thing for a filthy sinner like me: Christ has died in my stead and extended to me the new covenant promise of salvation. Why would we ever despise the command of Christ to rivet our hearts on his cross? Would we rather put a blindfold over our eyes than behold the most magnificent revelation of God’s glory ever given?

We will never see our Savior as we ought lest we utilize the means he has given us to do so. Let us therefore recognize that the Lord’s Supper is a telescope aimed directly at the glory of God that we have not yet learned to use. Oh that we might learn its use!

102 Thomas Watson, The Lord's Supper, 12-13. “Calvin calls the crucifixion of Christ, Cardo salutis, the hinge on which our salvation turns: an Luther calls it Fons salutis, a gospel-spring, opened to refresh sinners.”

103 Bruce A. Ware, God’s Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 41. “...God is revealed in Jesus Christ with an immediacy unparalleled by any other revelation. In significant ways Jesus explained God to the world (John 1:18) and displayed his glory (John 1:14) in a manner hitherto unknown. Especially one thinks of the cross of Christ where the meaning and manifestation of God’s wisdom and power (1 Cor 1:18-25), mercy and righteousness (2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 3:18) are heightened beyond all humanly comprehensible bounds. There is no question, then, of the centrality, supremacy, and finality of the revelation of Jesus Christ.”
Looking Around: The realities of the new covenant. In the previous section we established that every current new covenant benefit is grounded in the cross. Just as we look back to worship Christ for his cross-work we look around us to give him glory for his fruit-work. In other words, we strive to recognize all the fruits or benefits that he purchased for us and that we now experience as members of the new covenant community.

This process of recognition is not explicit in the instructions of the Lord’s Supper like the backward looking command; however, it is implicit and intuitive. The very setting of the Lord’s Supper, as it was intended, steers us in the direction of recognition, meditation, and thanksgiving. This is God’s table we are talking about. We sit at the Creator’s table, the table of the all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful, immutable God. The Lord Jesus has invited us there and has paid the fee we could never afford to provide us our seat. He desires that we be there. He actually wants us at his table. Partaking of the covenant meal communicates volumes in itself, for there we have fellowship with God in one of the most intimate actions known to man: eating together.

At his table we also recognize that we who were once enemies of God have been reconciled to him. God has prepared a table in the presence of his enemies and in his grace he has fed us. At his table we recognize that we were once orphans who have now been adopted. Every taste of wine and every bite of bread is a testimony to the

104 Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 1341. “The new covenant which is procured and ratified by the blood of Christ, is a charter of pardon, an act of indemnity, in order to a reconciliation between God and man.”
provision of the Father to whom we now belong. At the table we are reminded of our justification for the Father considers us righteous through the son and shares intimate fellowship with us. At the Lord’s Table we understand that we are bride of Christ for in this ordinance husband and wife sit down to share a meal.

At the table we also have an acute sense our sinfulness and shame. This causes us to recognize the sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ to cleanse all our sin. It also directs our attention to the glorious third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who graciously resides within us as a living guarantee that God will never leave us and that we will be sanctified entirely: body, soul, and spirit. Not to belabor the point, but it must be noted that the reception of the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins are at the heart of the new covenant. At this table we also look around and see other new covenant members

105 John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion Vol. II (Philedelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 7th Edition), 641. “After God has once received us into his family, and not only so as to admit us among his servants, but to number us with his children—in order to fulfill the part of a most excellent father, solicitous for his offspring, he also undertakes to sustain and nourish us as long as we live; and not content with this, he has been pleased to give us a pledge, as a further assurance of his never-ceasing liberality.”

106 Peter J. Leithart, Blessed are the Hungry: Meditations on the Lord's Supper, 14. “The Supper is a sign of our justification in that we are righteous table fellows and covenant keepers.”

107 Ibid, 30.

108 Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, 991. “As I partake in the breaking of the bread when I eat it and the pouring out of the cup when I drink from it, I proclaim again and again that my sins were part of the cause of Jesus’ suffering and death. In this way sorrow, joy, thanksgiving, and deep love for Christ are richly intermingled in the beauty of the Lord’s Supper.”

109 I. Howard Marshall, Last Supper and Lord’s Supper, 149. “The Lord’s Supper becomes the occasion for expressing one’s acceptance of Jesus and the salvation which he offers, and the fact that the Supper is a repeated occurrence indicates the continual dependence of the believer on Jesus and his continual need for forgiveness.”
feasting with us and we sense that we belong with them. The family of God and the fellowship that characterizes it is a new covenant provision. The most intimate friendships we have in the body of Christ are blood bought gifts.

Above all, as first mentioned, this table is about having fellowship with God. The new covenant promise “I will be their God and they will be my people” (Jer 31:33) is the banner of love that hangs over this banqueting table. Jesus delights to seat us at this table and serve himself to us. Here at this table God has intended that we experience sweet communion with him through his Son and behold the bright rays of his glory as we look back at the cross and around at the benefits it has secured.110

**Looking Forward: The consummation of the new covenant.** The Lord’s Supper is a three-course meal, for once we have feasted on the past and present our palates await the future. The references to the future are explicit, as we have seen, in all four major texts on the Lord’s Supper. Just as the supper calls us to look back at the cross and around at its fruit, so it beckons us to fix our eyes on the future where we will experience the fullness of that fruit. The paradox of this meal is that our souls are filled and at the same time left hungry. As we feast on Christ and the present benefits he has secured, our souls ache for more; they long for the consummation of his covenant

110 Appendix 2: Quotations on the Lord’s Supper, *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*, 194. John G. Paton, missionary to the New Hebrides, describes his experience of serving the Lord’s Supper for the first time to new converts of an unreached tribe. “At the moment when I put the bread and wine into those dark hands, once stained with the blood of cannibalism, now stretched out to receive and partake of the emblems and seals of the Redeemer’s love, I had a foretaste of the joy of glory that well nigh broke my heart to pieces. I shall never taste a deeper bliss till I gaze on the glorified face of Jesus himself.”
promises. This then is another function of the Lord’s Table: to increase hunger.

The already-not yet scheme is a helpful framework to bring into the discussion again at this juncture. The benefits we currently have flow forth from the cross, but are not the fullness of these benefits. The future benefits we will receive are the fullness of the present benefits we currently possess. In other words, the present benefits and the future benefits of the new covenant are one in kind, but distinct in terms of our experience in quality and quantity. For example Scripture teaches that we have been adopted (Gal 4:4-6, Rom 8:14-15) and yet we await our adoption (Rom 8:23); we have been seated with Christ (Eph 2:5-6) and we have not yet been seated with Christ (Rev 3:21); we have experienced resurrection (Eph 2:6), but not fully (1 Cor 15:50-54). At the Lord’s Supper we experience the already of the great wedding banquet and as we do we yearn for the not yet.¹¹¹

At the table we experience the presence of Christ and our hope is fueled for the day when we will see the face of Jesus across from us at the table in his kingdom. We are reminded at this table how tangible and real the Christ we have not yet seen is, for he actually eats and we will eat with him. The Lord’s Supper is to produce within us certainty that we will dine with our Savior at the great wedding feast. This feast signifies the zenith of the new covenant promise “I will be your God and you will be my people” (Jer 31:33). The wedding feast of the Lamb also signifies that the Bride of Christ has been purified. God’s people have been delivered from all sin and have been glorified in

¹¹¹ Russell D. Moore, Understanding Four Views on the Lord’s Supper, 31. “In Christ this new age is a reality, although a veiled reality seen only to those who have the eyes of faith. The meal Jesus feeds us then is a sign of an eschatological banquet, with the church the acknowledging the ‘already’ and pining for the ‘not yet.’”
the presence of Christ. It is at this time as well that God ushers in the new heavens and new earth where he will dwell with his bride forever. The Lord’s Supper was intended to produce in us a thirst for this!

This ordinance therefore, is a meal for sojourners and exiles on the earth. It is a meal to nourish them and encourage them on their heavenly journey. It is a meal that whets their appetites for the kingdom of God. It is a meal that gives them the strength to refuse settling down in this foreign land. It is one of God’s provisions to get them safely home.

I would argue that this is one of the least emphasized aspects of the Lord’s Supper. It is imperative that we recover the forward-looking thrust of this meal for the good of our own souls and our fellow sojourners. We dare not neglect this Christ-ordained means of stoking the fires of our hearts for the new heavens and new earth. How can our appetite for the heavenly banquet increase if we fail to utilize the meal above all meals that gives us a taste for it?

112 Thomas Watson, The Lord’s Supper, 44. “So, truly, we have a great journey from earth to heaven, therefore we have need to recruit ourselves by the way. How many sins have we to subdue! How many duties to perform! How many wants to supply! How many graces to strengthen! How many adversaries to conflict with! So that we do not abate by the way, by the feeding upon the body an blood of the Lord, our ‘youth is renewed like the eagle’s.’”

113 John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion Vol. II, “Now, the only food of our souls is Christ; and to him, therefore our heavenly Father invites us, that being refreshed by a participation of him, we may gain fresh vigour from day to day, till we arrive at the heavenly immortality.”

114 Craig Blomberg, The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians, 238. “As for the temporal emphases of the Lord’s Supper, the church in general today seems best at stressing the backward look to the cross. The most neglected is our anticipation of the heavenly banquet. Somewhere in between falls our focus on present fellowship with God and others.”
I have argued that our understanding of the Lord’s Supper must be controlled by the concept of new covenant. Through this discussion it has become evident that the past, present, and future components of the new covenant do not stand alone, but are interdependent. The past is the foundation of the present and future, for without the inauguration there would be no current experience, nor future hope. The present, and future are also organically related for the future is not wholly distinct from the present; rather it is of the same substance. In other words, the present is actually a historical experience of the future. The present experience, however, is not complete and therefore we anticipate the day when the appetizer will give way to the feast. The redemptive historical context encompasses the past, present, and future in this paradigm, thus informing every part. This interrelationship is visualized in the diagram below.

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Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible*, 297. “The end of the old age occurs when Jesus comes the first time because he is the embodiment of the new age. Yet the old age continues to exist along with the new age so that the two overlap. This coming of the end now, and the fact that the end is not yet come, corresponds to the Christian being saved and still waiting to be saved.”
Looking Up: The Vertical Gaze. The Lord’s Supper is fundamentally christocentric, which makes it a theocentric doctrine. The gospel is an extrinsic, objective, finished work accomplished by Christ and extended to us as promise. The Lord’s Supper causes us to look outside of ourselves consistently to receive afresh the good news. Sin would have us look inward God would have us look outward. This battle against the inward bend in man began when Adam’s rebellion left in its wake a humanity curved in on itself and away from God. Our sin bends us inward and causes us to look within ourselves for all the necessary resources for life and salvation. The gospel that liberates us from our selves requires that we repudiate our resources and look outside ourselves for rescue. As image bearers we were created to gaze upward and outward. Indeed, we were made to be engrossed with God and fellow man. Preoccupation with self is thus an invention of sin. The gospel that we look to outside of us is concerned with setting us free from ourselves and reorienting our gaze back to where it belongs. The Lord’s Supper is part and parcel of this renewal process in which we look away from self to God.

Far too often the Lord’s Supper becomes merely an exercise of looking inward and of self-examination. The primary aim of this meal is to rivet our attention on the Lord Jesus Christ and to find in him our sufficiency for life and salvation. We are to magnify him as our whole and only Savior. This God-centered focus of the ordinance also has Trinitarian contours. The Lord’s Supper communicates that we have fellowship with the Father and the Son through the Son and by the Spirit. It is the Father and Son who lay the spread, the Son who makes sitting at table possible, and the Spirit who draws us initially to the table and keeps us coming back. The Lord’s Supper is about fellowship with the Triune God centering on Christ empowered by the Spirit to the glory of God. In short, the
supper beckons our focus upward toward our great God.

Looking Over: The Horizontal Gaze. The Lord’s Supper also calls us to a focus outside of ourselves and onto our neighbor. This ordinance intrinsically expresses the unity of the body of Christ and demands that we strive to maintain that unity to participate worthily at the table. The self-examination called for in this meal has everything to do with our relationships with others in the body. The hospitality of God expressed in this meal is to be reflected in our interaction with one another. We are called to welcome our brothers in the same way that Christ welcomed us. The New Testament sees contradiction in sitting at God’s table and mistreating our brother and sister.

The Lord’s Supper serves to foster greater intimacy and accountability with one another. It reinforces that every member of the body of Christ has value and is indeed the “brother for whom Christ died” (Rom 14:15). Thus the Lord’s Supper provides the table where we all sit eye to eye recognizing our equality and value before God in Christ. The table of the Lord is a family table and as sitting down for a meal together becomes the rhythm of our life together we attest to the fact, as do natural families, that we are indeed a family doing what families do. The Lord’s Supper is an invitation to neighbor centeredness.

These vertical and horizontal dynamics are connected. As we look horizontal we encourage one another to look vertical. Often the relishing of Christ witnessed in a brother at the table invokes us to more deeply appreciate the significance of the event. It is often the exhortation of the pastor on the horizontal level that causes us to shift our perspective upward. The aim of the vertical pursuit is not a bunch of individuals seeking God on their own but the church as one man seeking the Lord God. The vertical gaze serves to empower us to more effectively engage the horizontal dimension of our lives in
the body. There is thus an important interplay in the moving upward and outward in the body of Christ. The Lord’s Supper serves us in this edifying movement. The diagram below seeks to capture this dynamic. We move up and down this vertical horizontal continuum and they serve to reinforce one another.

Our Practice of the Lord’s Supper

The New Testament in the context of salvation history has laid the foundation for understanding the Lord’s Supper. But it has also done more than that. It has handed us tools to build on that foundation. The question we are addressing in this section is how this study informs our implementation of the Lord’s Supper. What practical steps must now be taken as a result of gaining an increased understanding of this important ordinance?

Making it a Meal. As we have seen, the evidence of the New Testament
places the Lord’s Supper in the context of a meal. It is important at this point to say clearly that there is no New Testament imperative demanding that the Lord’s Supper be done in the context of a meal. Further, the New Testament evidence is not conclusive on whether or not the Lord’s Supper was an actual meal in the early church. I therefore reject the position that the Lord’s Supper must be a meal or must be done in the context of a meal for it to be the authentic Lord’s Supper. We dare not create a command where there is none.

This being said I hope it is clear from this paper that the Old Testament backdrop and that the New Testament practice of the Lord’s Supper cannot be appropriately understood apart from the context of the meal. The question that faces us in our specific practice of the Lord’s Supper therefore belongs to the area of wisdom and helpfulness. How can we best serve the church? How can we most effectively foster fellowship, unity and gospel-centeredness? How can we encourage accountability? I would urge us to consider that placing the Lord’s Supper back into the context of a meal may be an effective way to better serve the church.

I am of the opinion that separating the Lord’s Supper from the context of a meal

\[116\] The fact that the bread and wine were not given until after the meal (1 Cor 11:25, Lk 22:20) does not separate it from the context of a meal. Whether the elements are received at the beginning, middle, or end of a meal the context remains a meal. Matthew’s account says they took the bread “as they were eating” (26:26), we cannot separate the institution from the context of a supper. As for examples in the early church where the setting of a meal is not explicit (Acts 20:7) we should not argue from silence that it was separated from the context of meal, but rely on more explicit texts that make the common practice of the Lord’s Supper plain (Acts 2:46, 1 Cor 11:17-33). See also I. Howard Marshall, \textit{Last Supper and Lord’s Supper}, 129-130. He argues that the Lord’s Supper in Acts 20:7 should be understood as a meal. “The language used indicates a meal, and Luke’s point is precisely that the congregation was so eager to hear Paul that it was prepared to wait until past midnight before partaking of food.”
meal has weakened our understanding of this significant ordinance. I believe there is need in the church today to recapture the “supper” in the Lord’s Supper. In recent years, many have trumpeted this same call to the church. It is important to hear some of their voices.

Most contemporary Baptist churches—and many other evangelical Protestant churches—distribute chewing gum-sized pellets of bread and thimble-sized shot glasses of juice. Increasingly this practice is even more individualized by companies that sell to churches ‘disposable Communion sets’. This practice nullifies the thrust of the New Testament emphasis on a common cup and a common loaf, both of which signify the unity of the congregation in Christ. It also mitigates the meaning of the Supper as a supper, as a meal. The meaning of the Supper would go a long way toward recovery in our churches if we asked the congregation to tear apart the bread and to drink together from a common cup of wine—practices that would have been common place in the early New Testament communities.

-Russell Moore

Early in the church’s history, the inclusion of the Lord’s Supper as part of a full meal disappeared. Again, such inclusion was never commanded, but there are strong arguments for reinstating the practice, at least part if not all of the time.

-Craig Blomberg

Churches should creatively consider ways in which the agape meal or love-feast might be restored: an entire sacral meal culminating in the Lord’s Supper.

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118 Russell D. Moore, Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper, 41-42. Moore argues that American individualism has crept into the church and displays itself in the church’s perspective and practice of the Lord’s Supper.

119 Craig Blomberg, The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians, 234. Blomberg also argues that returning to the practice of celebrating the Lord’s Supper in home and house churches could improve our present fellowship with God and others and increase our understanding of the significance of the Lord’s Supper (p.238).

120 Craig L. Blomberg, Contagious Holiness: Jesus' meal with sinners, 179-180. Blomberg calls for balance in recovering the meal context for the ordinance arguing that a meal without the bread and wine climaxing in the remembrance of Christ is not helpful and nor is the infrequent practice of the supper as an afterthought to worship. He also says that those that administer the elements at the table in the context of a love feast
If the Lord's Supper is to be experienced as a communion or *fellowship meal*, its roots in the structure of the human meal need to be recovered and accentuated. With respect to the Eucharist, the phenomenon involved is the human meal: not the physical act of chewing and swallowing but the sharing of one's self with other selves in the context of eating and drinking together. When the essential connection between the fellowship shared at the Lord's Supper and the fellowship shared during other human meals is obscured, the sacrament cannot help but be perceived as an epiphenomenon. When that happens, frequency of celebration is seen either as unnecessary or as a threat to the sacrament's "sacred" meaning. As long as the architecture of the church makes it impossible for people to perceive themselves as having been gathered about a common table, as long as the communion bread bears little or no resemblance to the staff of life served at ordinary human meals, and as long as the cups holding the fruit of the vine look like props from the movie "Honey, I Shrunk the Kids"—the theological relationship between the Eucharist and the phenomenon of a human meal will remain extrinsic at best, occasionally asserted but rarely experienced.  

-Frederick Holper

High-church theologians love to talk about 'real presence' in the Eucharist. Shouldn't we start talking about a 'real supper,' a 'real table,' 'real eating' ('real food for real people')? Then maybe we would experience 'real communion,' in which members of our congregations have an opportunity to make known to each other their joys and pains...D.B. Gibson, a Church of the Brethren writer of a past generation, argues in a logic that should register with all Biblicists and even more with immersionists: If baptizo means to immerse, it is even more indisputable that deipnon means a full meal, and in particular a supper.  

-Marlin Jeshcke

The Lord’s Supper in the New Testament is a meal. The appropriate setting for the sacrament is a table, and the appropriate posture in our western culture is sitting.

need to take the identical precautions as at a more traditional Lord’s Supper.

121 Frederick J. Holper, "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup," *Interpretation* 48, no. 1 (1994 January): 69-70.


123 I. Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper*, 156. Marshall also states that the “New Testament itself recognizes the difficulties that arose when the Lord’s Supper was part of a common church meal. Nevertheless, the linking of the Supper with a meal may offer a form of fellowship that could contribute to the edification of the church today” (p.157).
To take the Lord’s Supper outside of its meal context, and perhaps also to take it out of the context of the Christian home, are hermeneutical moves the NT neither suggests nor endorses. Perhaps this is why the significance of the Lord’s Supper has too often be trivialized or marginalized or over-ritualized. To denude the ceremony of its social context leads to the distortion of its essential meaning and function.\(^{124}\)

-Ben Witherington

I believe such convictions flow out of a straight-forward reading of the New Testament. As many of these authors have noted, the meaning of the ordinance is wrapped up in its connection to a meal. As a result of this present study I believe it would be helpful to begin considering how our practice of the Lord’s Supper takes into account the important context of the meal. As this paper has argued much more is at stake in understanding and practicing this ordinance than is often thought. We must therefore grapple hard with the text and take the appropriate steps to implement this supper according to the New Testament pattern. The fullness of the benefits to be derived from this meal cannot be expected lest there be conformity to the apostolic witness.

**The Atmosphere of the Supper.** The historical continuum of past, present, and future informs not only the significance of the meal, but also the atmosphere. The backward look at the cross, the present focus on covenant benefits, and the future certainty of glory produce a mingling of both trembling and joy. As we have seen, the New Testament instructs us that it is a serious matter to approach this table and at the very same time a matter of great celebration.\(^{125}\) A balanced focus on all three time-

\(^{124}\) Ben Witherington, *The Lord’s Supper*, 113.

\(^{125}\) Acts 2:46-47 and 1 Cor 11:27-32 are the two texts that when placed together call for a balance of joy and reverence in the Lord’s Supper. As we have seen John 13-17 is also instructive in terms of the appropriate atmosphere for the Lord’s Supper.
periods along the historical continuum produces a proper balance in the atmosphere of
the Lord’s Supper. Meditation upon our crucified Christ must lead to reverence,

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focusing on our present benefits must produce thankfulness, and looking at our future

hope must result in great joy. At this table laughter and lowliness meet, trembling and

thanksgiving are wed, and fear is mingled with festivity. Awe is not inconsistent with joy,
in fact, the greatest of joys are accompanied by it. The appropriate focus in the Lord’s

Supper leads to a fitting atmosphere at the Lord’s Table.

The Elements of the Supper. The New Testament is clear that the elements

of the Lord’s Supper consist of one loaf of bread and one common cup. When Jesus

said, “Do this in remembrance of me” (Lk 22:19, italics mine) he was referring to the

whole of the meal he was modeling. This clearly includes the use of one loaf and one


126 I. Howard Marshall, Last Supper and Lord’s Supper, 157. “The New Testament links together past, present, and future in the significance of the Lord’s Supper; it looks back to the death of Jesus for our salvation, it rejoices in the gift of present salvation and fellowship with the risen Lord, and it looks forward to his coming and the inauguration of the heavenly banquet. The church today needs to ask whether it does justice to all these elements and thus celebrates the supper with real thanksgiving and fullness of joy.”

127 Ibid, 153.

128 Peter Hoytema, "The Lord's Supper as Lament and Praise," The Living Pulpit (October-December 2002): 42. Along similar lines Hoytema articulates an important balance for worship at the Lord’s Table. “So which is it? Is the Lord’s Supper an occasion for lament or praise? Which event serves as the primary historical referent, Good Friday or Easter Sunday? Of course, both are correct. The challenge for preachers is to lead communities of faith to think about and actually practice the Lord’s Supper in such a way that both the triumph and the tragedy that are inherently part of the sacrament stand tall. The fact of the matter, is lament and praise are not mutually exclusive…Like dance partners, lament and praise require each other if the grace and beauty of the sacrament are to be witnessed and experienced.”

129 None of the accounts of the Lord’s Supper refer to the bread or the cup in the plural (see 1 Cor 10:14-17).
cup. Robert Letham has argued convincingly that departing from the use of the elements prescribed by Christ dilutes our understanding of the ordinance.

It is clear that the Lord’s Supper practiced in the New Testament church used a single loaf. So much is evident from the earliest description of the Supper as ‘the breaking of bread.’ Paul, too, comments on the church at the Eucharist being ‘one loaf’ (1 Cor 10:16-17). This gives eloquent witness to two vital things. First, it vividly portrays the body of Christ being broken for us on the cross. The tearing apart of the loaf depicts the violent and dreadful death by which we have been delivered by sin and condemnation. Second, it demonstrates that all the faithful share in the one body of Christ. As each removes a segment from a broken piece of one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf (1 Cor 10:17)…The practice very common in many churches, of presenting bread pre-cut into dozens or hundreds of bite-sized pieces misses this entirely. Instead, it is redolent of post-Enlightenment individualism, where religion is conceived as a private, inward matter between the individual soul and God. This is to change the sacrament, indeed to violate and pollute it. Augustine’s comment on the Eucharist as ‘a visible word of God’ loses its sense. The element of proclaiming Christ’s death, mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11, is blurred.130

The New Testament evidence is in agreement on this point: one bread, one cup.131 One question remains, will we follow the pattern laid down by Christ? Or will we sacrifice obedience for convenience? How the details of this will be worked out is a secondary concern that must not hinder a commitment to obedience. How will we hear, see, and taste the gospel through this meal if we fail to utilize the symbols Christ has given us to do so?

**The Frequency of the Supper.** The New Testament is clear in regard to one thing about frequency: the church practiced the Lord’s Supper often. It is noteworthy that the New Testament evidence teaches that the most frequent participation in the Lord’s

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130 Robert Letham, *The Lord’s Supper: Eternal Word in Broken Bread*, 50-52. Letham argues that the same arguments against pre-cut bread apply to the practice of individual plastic cups.

Supper was daily and the least frequent was weekly. It seems to me that understanding the significance of the Lord’s Supper and its tremendous benefits for believers puts to rest the misinformed concern of ‘overdoing’ the Lord’s Supper. Russell Moore also illustrates that misunderstanding the need for Christians to hear the gospel militates against frequency in the Lord’s Supper.

If the Supper is gospel proclamation meant to call forth and strengthen the faith of believers, how could such an event become rote? The key to this question is not so much in an evangelical fear of sacerdotal tendencies as in an evangelical ignorance of the role of gospel preaching for the believer.

Grasping our desperate need for the gospel will instruct us on exactly why the Lord’s Supper is not only a privilege, but a frequent need. Do we long for Christ? Do we ache for deeper fellowship with him? Do we yearn to see his glory? Do we want more of heaven in our hearts? Do we desire greater strength for the journey? Do we want closer relationships in the body of Christ? Then let us take our seats more often at the Lord’s Table, for it is one of God’s appointed means for satisfying these hunger pangs.

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Four Views on the Lord's Supper, 41-42.

132 Matthew Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible, “It should be frequent. And it is fit that this spiritual diet should be taken often too. It must be perpetual. It is to be celebrated till the Lord shall come.”

133 Russell D. Moore, Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper, 36.

134 Robert Letham, The Lord’s Supper: Eternal Word in Broken Bread, 60. “The bottom line is that the church is free to hold the Lord’s Supper as often as it deems appropriate. There is no binding requirement. However, the degree to which the church desires it is a reliable gauge of how eagerly it wants Christ. An old argument against frequent communion (familiarity breeds contempt) deserves short shrift. Does that apply too to prayer, Scripture reading, preaching, or your relationship with your spouse? Does it even apply to Christ.”

135 I. Howard Marshall, Last Supper and Lord’s Supper, 155. “In line with what appears to have been the practice of the early church in the New Testament the Lord’s Supper should be celebrated frequently in the church, and there is good reason for
The Participants in the Supper. Who can come to the Lord’s Table? I.

Howard Marshall answers this question in the conclusion of his study on the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament.

The New Testament says nothing about any particular conditions for participation in the sacrament beyond a willingness to come to Christ in faith and with love for other believers. The Lord’s Supper should be open to all today who wish to feed on Christ and profess faith in him…The New Testament welcomes sinners to the Lord’s Table but also warns against unworthy participation in a spirit of frivolity or lovelessness. The church today in maintaining an ‘open table’ should also remind participants of the solemn implications of the sacrament.  

There is a delicate balance that must be maintained if the Lord’s Supper is to communicate both the free welcome to the table and the utter gravity of approaching that table. Bottom line, however, there is only one type of person seated at the Lord’s Table: a repentant sinner. Any restrictions beyond the New Testament evidence run the risk of building fences where Scripture does not.

doing so on each Lord’s Day.”

136 Ibid, 156.

137 For further discussion on participation in the Lord’s Supper see Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, 996-999. Craig Blomberg, The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians, 238-239. Matthew Henry. Commentary on the Whole Bible, 1818. Henry states that “fearful believers should not be discouraged from attending at this holy ordinance by the sound of these words [1 Cor 11:29]. The Holy Spirit never indited this to deter serious Christians from their duty, though the devil has often made this advantage of it, and robbed good Christians of their choicest comforts.” Thomas Watson, The Lord’s Supper, 60-73. In a chapter devoted to answering objections to coming to the sacrament Watson shows that “poor doubting Christians [should] be encouraged to come to the Lord’s Table.” In response to the objection: “I find such a faintness and feebleness in my soul that I dare not go to the Lord’s Table.” He responds, “Thou has the more need to go: drink of this ‘wine…for thy infirmities’ (1 Tim 5:23). Were it not strange for a man to argue thus, ‘My body is weak and declining, therefore I will not go to the physician?’ He should the rather go. Our weakness should send us to Christ; his blood is mortal to sin, and vital to grace.” William Willimon. Sunday Dinner: The Lord’s Supper and the Christian Life, 52. “John Wesley saw that Holy Communion was not a self congratulatory meal for saints, but a life-changing meal for sinners…Wesley graciously admitted all ‘earnest seekers’ to the Lord’s Table. The only requirement was a desire to
This issue of worthy participants at the Lord’s Table brings up the question of baptism and communion. There is a long-standing debate in certain circles on whether or not believers who have not been baptized should be permitted to participate in the Lord’s Supper. The three positions on this debate are closed communion, close communion, and open communion. The first two positions argue with differing degrees of stringency that a biblical baptism is necessary for one to partake at the Lord’s Table.\textsuperscript{138} The third position argues that faith in Christ rather than baptism is the prerequisite for participation in the supper. I would argue that the meal itself is an argument for the third position. The Lord’s Supper is God’s welcome to imperfect and erring sinners. Getting it wrong on the question of baptism is significant and needs to be addressed, however, it is not an error of such magnitude to lead to the exclusion of a family member from the family table. I fear that barring a brother for whom Christ died from Lord’s Table is a blatant contradiction of that which we seek to celebrate. Let us therefore practice gospel hospitality and welcome men and women in the same manner that our Lord and Savior has welcomed us (Rom 15:1-7). We dare not refuse communion with those that our Lord himself communes with.\textsuperscript{139}

\textbf{The Servers of the Supper.} There is not one text in the New Testament that meet the risen Christ.

\textsuperscript{138} This line of thinking is primarily rooted in two arguments. First, the New Testament is clear on the order of baptism and then the Lord’s Supper in the experience of the believer (Acts 2). Second, it is argued that baptism is necessary for church membership and that the Lord’s Supper is reserved for only those who are members of the church.

either appoints or restricts who should administer the Lord’s Supper.\textsuperscript{140} Throughout
church history wisdom has placed the oversight of the ordinance in the hands of the
overseers of the church.\textsuperscript{141} The leadership of the church is therefore likely to have the
privilege of serving this meal.\textsuperscript{142} As overseers they are responsible for communicating the
truth of the meal, using the appropriate elements for the meal, and, when fitting,
delegating others to oversee the meal.

**Taking Practical Steps.** What can do on a practical level to begin the process
of elevating the Lord’s Supper as an important component of our life together as the
church? I think that the answer to this question revolved around two issues: education and
practice. First, the issue of education is vital for growing and developing the importance
of the supper in our churches. Before I launched out into research on the matter of this
ordinance I thought very differently about the meaning and significance of the Lord’s
Supper. I had a pretty anemic view of the supper. Studying the Scripture and reading

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Testament says nothing about who should conduct or celebrate the sacrament, and there
is no evidence whatever that anything corresponding to our modern ‘ordination’ was
essential. The celebration of the sacrament today should not be confined to those
ordained to the ministry by the laying on of hands but should be open to any believer
authorized by the church to do so.”

\item[141] I. John Hesselink, “Reformed View: The Real Presence of Christ,” in
*Understanding Four Views on the Lord’s Supper*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Grand Rapids:
against abuse of the Lord’s Supper, a responsible leader ought to be in charge of
administering it, but it does not seem that Scripture requires that only ordained clergy or
selected church officers could do this.”

\item[142] Matthew Henry, *The Communicant’s Companion or Instructions for the
right receiving of the Lord’s Supper* (Philadelphia: Herman Hooker Publishers, 1840),
Intro:1. “Who am I and what is my fathers house that I should have the honor to be a
‘door keeper in the house of my God’ to show his guests the way to his table? It is a
service with its own recompense, work which is its own wages.”
\end{footnotes}
books about it have transformed my whole thinking. The Lord’s Supper has become one of the most important components of worship to me. Knowledge changes us. There are riches to be mined from this meal and these need to be displayed and shared with the rest of the community. If we would see change in this area we must seek to educate ourselves and our people on what this ordinance is all about and why it matters. Second, we need to think through the issue of practice and implement change where it is necessary. In one sense these two components of education and practice cannot be separated. The way we practice the Lord’s Supper communicates as much about it as what we say about it.

To that end, the following are some practical suggestions for how you can better the education and practice of the Lord’s Supper in the church.

1. Consider taking some time to study the Lord’s Supper for yourself. Have you firmed up your convictions about the meaning and significance of this ordinance? From the fruit of your study preach a series on the Lord’s Supper and study the ordinance in small groups or Sunday school. I can only recall having heard two sermons on the Lord’s Supper in the last 10 years of hearing the Scripture preached. This ordinance fits into the category of things we know but don’t know. We have not given much thought to the supper and have assumed that we know all we need to know about it. A fresh look at Scripture is foundational to any transformation in our practice of this element of our worship.

2. Consider taking a few minutes before you partake of the Lord’s Supper to explain the meaning and significance of the ordinance from one particular angle. We often become rote in the instruction preceding the Lord’s Supper. It would be helpful to focus attention on one past, present, or future aspect of the ordinance. We can also focus attention on the vertical and horizontal aspects of the supper
highlighting different aspects of either. It could also be helpful and edifying to give the laymen of the church with the gift of teaching the opportunity during this time to share on one aspect of the ordinance.

3. Consider moving the Lord’s Supper from the end of the order of service to the beginning or to the middle. We often unwittingly communicate that the Lord’s Supper is a tag on that does not need a whole lot of attention when we confine it solely to the end of a service. What would it look like to have a service that actually revolved around the table? By switching things up in this way we can communicate the importance of the meal by its placement in the order of service.

4. Consider serving the Lord’s Supper in new and fresh ways. If you pass trays think about having a service where the members come forward. There is something meaningful in a person handing you the bread and cup and telling you: “this is the body of Christ broken for you and the blood of Christ shed for you.” If the practice is to take it individually while everyone faces forward then switch it up by having the congregation break into smaller groups to look each other in the eye and take it together. By bringing variation to the practice different aspects of the past, present, future continuum along with the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the Lord’s Supper will be naturally teased out. By keeping things fresh in this manner the church will begin to appreciate the ordinance in new ways.

5. Consider utilizing one loaf of bread and one cup in communion. Even if we partook of communion with individual cups and individual pieces it would be helpful if from the pulpit the pastor had one loaf and one cup. I believe we must strive to retain the symbol of the one loaf and one cup. I also believe that the breaking of the bread is a significant gospel visual that we need before us. One
easy step in this direction would thus be the utilization of these two symbols by
the pastor as he instructs and leads communion.

6. Consider implementing communion in the context of a meal in small groups. If
your church meets in smaller units in each other’s homes then train and authorize
the leaders of these small groups to oversee the Lord’s Supper. This may be the
single most important way for us to make communion central once again in the
life of the church. I believe that gospel-centered fellowship, accountability, and
familial intimacy will be the natural result of placing the supper at the heart of our
small group gatherings. For this to be done well there must be strong oversight
and clear, practical instruction from the eldership along with confident and
informed implementation by the small group leader. It is likely that this is the
setting where we will begin to plumb the depths of the Lord’s Supper.\textsuperscript{143}

7. Consider how to influence the atmosphere of communion in ways that faithfully
communicate the varying aspects of the Lord’s Supper. What is the main tenor of
communion in your church? It has been my experience, albeit limited, that
communion feels primarily heavy, sober, somber, and introspective. To be faithful
to what the Lord’s Supper is about we need also to foster joy, celebration, and
gratitude. Smiles and shouts are not inappropriate at the table of our Lord. It is
hard to imagine that appropriate behavior at the wedding feast of the Lamb is
inappropriate behavior at the foretaste of that same meal.

\textsuperscript{143} Moving the Lord’s Supper into the home raises some questions of the
appropriate place or setting to partake of communion. In this vein there may be place for
serving the supper to those who are facing illnesses and even death. For a helpful
discussion on this see Elmer S. Freeman, \textit{The Lord’s Supper in Protestantism} (New York:
The Macmillian Company, 1945), 137-142.
8. Consider how to bend men’s attention in the Lord’s Supper away from themselves, upward to God, and outward to their brothers and sisters. One of the greatest errors in our day regarding this ordinance is the pervasive call to introspection. We have totally missed the point of this meal if we gauge whether or not we should participate by looking inward at ourselves and not even considering God or neighbor. The Lord’s Supper calls us to a vertical and horizontal gaze. We consider ourselves but only in relation to these two other dimensions. The supper would take us outside of ourselves not push us further into ourselves. The call to examine ourselves is fundamentally a call to think about our neighbor and how we have been in relation to them. Practically speaking, this could be done by replacing the call for introspection with a call to consider our brothers and sisters in the church. Eyes wide open making contact with the saints may not be such a bad idea as we partake of this ordinance.

9. Consider how to consistently communicate the gravity of participating in communion. There is an appropriate dread that should accompany taking the bread to our mouths and the wine to our lips. The fact that God kills men who mess around with his children and unworthily take his meal should cause us to tremble. It goes without being said that unbelievers should be warned to not take of the ordinance. However, there is no warning or example of unbelievers being put to death for unworthily taking the meal. Rather it is the believers who are put to death for their unworthy participation and therefore it is believers to whom these warnings are primarily directed. It is my conviction and experience that God intends to use the gravity of this meal as a consistent and powerful means to provoke us to continual repentance. As we explain the utter seriousness of the
Lord’s Supper and the need for sin to be dealt with not skirted around the Holy Spirit will work in us necessary repentance. The Lord’s Supper is an instrument of accountability let us therefore utilize this important means of grace.

10. Consider increasing the frequency of communion in your fellowship. When you combine tagging the ordinance on to the end of the service with taking it infrequently you have the recipe for insignificance. Frequency does not breed contempt ignorance does. The Lord’s Supper is to be a central not peripheral component of our worship. Greater frequency in our practice therefore should be seriously weighed. Begin taking steps to greater frequency no matter how small. If your church takes it quarterly add four more times to the year and continue with that trajectory. If your church takes it monthly strive for bi-monthly and so forth and so on. The key is to take steps in that direction.

If one thing has emerged from this study it is this: the Lord’s Supper is significant. As an express command of Christ and a vital component of the life of the church this ordinance deserves further attention. Knowledge of the things discussed in this paper will not suffice. The Lord’s Supper was given to be experienced and we must not be content with experiencing less than what Christ has provided.

Conformity to the New Testament is our goal and therefore it is important that you grapple with the proposals in this paper to see whether or not they reflect clear scriptural teaching. We need to examine our present practice of the Lord’s Supper in light of Scripture with willingness to subject tradition and comfort to obedience. And we must take the appropriate steps to conform our practice of the Lord’s Supper to the New Testament.
We have viewed the Lord’s Supper from the wide-angle of redemptive history, the panorama of the New Testament, and the close-up of contemporary practice. We have seen that the Old Testament backdrop provides us with important material for better understanding the Lord’s Supper. The meal in biblical thought and more particularly covenant meals, the Passover meal, sacrificial meals, and the eschatological meal all converge in the Lord’s Supper and find a partial fulfillment. The New Testament perspective has given us the beginnings of the supper, the early churches practice of the supper, the theological significance of the meal, and clear biblical instruction regarding the meal. We have seen that the significance of the meal is rightly understood and appreciated under the umbrella of the past, present, and future aspects of the new covenant. We have seen as well that the Lord’s Supper contains two vital dimensions: vertical and horizontal. The practical application section has sought to build a bridge from the rich theology of the Lord’s Supper to our contemporary practice in the church.

At the end of it all, the picture that has emerged is that of a Savior, a table, an invitation, and a meal. My hope is that your love for this Savior has increased, your response to his invitation will be glad and frequent, and your feasting at the table of the Lord will take on new and fresh meaning.
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