

"Has already changed the way in which I celebrate this sacrament  
with God's people." —Chad Van Dixhoorn

# SPREADING *the* FEAST

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INSTRUCTION & MEDITATIONS  
*for* MINISTRY *at the* LORD'S TABLE



HOWARD GRIFFITH

*Spreading the Feast*, by Dr. Howard Griffith, is a wondrous treatment of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Not only does Dr. Griffith provide an accurate theological and biblical foundation for understanding the sacrament, he also balances it with godly pastoral sensitivity. All church leaders and laity will benefit from this book. I now wait eagerly for Dr. Griffith's reflections on baptism.

—PETER LEE, Associate Professor of Old Testament,  
Reformed Theological Seminary, Washington, DC

Dr. Howard Griffith writes both as a warm-hearted pastor and as a clear-headed professor. As someone trying to straddle these worlds, I found that *Spreading the Feast* was just what I needed. A dip into these pages immediately offered new and helpful thoughts about the Lord's Supper; a dive into the book has already changed the way in which I celebrate this sacrament with God's people. If you love the written Word and visible Words of God, this book will be a treat!

—CHAD VAN DIXHOORN, Chancellor's Professor of  
Historical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary,  
Washington, DC

As a pastor, I've longed to lead our people more deeply into fellowship with Christ at his Table, but have felt limited. Using the entire Scripture to set the Table, and then practical meditations for preparing the meal, Howard Griffith has provided ministers every resource for rightly serving up the rich fare of God's grace.

—GLENN HOBURG, Grace Downtown church,  
Washington, DC

This book is for the minister of Word and sacrament. Griffith draws from years of pastoral ministry and biblical study to build this treatment of the Lord's Supper that is eminently usable, deeply redemptive-historical, and beautifully rendered. The young pastor will

benefit from early exposure to Griffith's meditations on the table, and the experienced pastor will find refreshment from the expert voice of a peer.

—SCOTT REDD, President, Associate Professor of  
Old Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary,  
Washington, DC

Are you a Christian who wonders what you should be thinking about at the Lord's Supper? Or perhaps a pastor at a loss to know how to help your people taste the riches of Christ at Communion? Then *Spreading the Feast* is the book for you. Professor Howard Griffith puts us all in his debt by his clear and rich exposition of the meaning of the Supper. But he does much more than that. Reclaiming the older tradition of "table sermons," he simultaneously provides both a model for pastors and soul-nourishing teaching to help us all to discover the joy of union and communion with Christ. So "taste and see that the Lord is good"!

—SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON, Professor of Systematic Theology,  
Redeemer Seminary, Dallas

When my local church asked me to preside at the Lord's Supper once a month, I worried that in time I would run out of ideas. But, as it turned out, the meaning of the Lord's Supper and its applications to the Christian's life and thought are inexhaustible. Every time I prepare an introduction to the communion service I learn something new. I have also learned much from books by other writers about the Lord's Supper. Most recently I have profited greatly from *Spreading the Feast* by my colleague Howard Griffith. Howard begins with a concise Reformed theology of the sacrament, then presents a number of his own table addresses from his long pastoral experience. His treatment is biblically sound, and he opens up rich themes, of which some

pastors may be unaware. The book will be very useful for pastors and students of theology. I recommend it highly.

—JOHN M. FRAME, J. D. Trimble Professor of Systematic  
Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary,  
Orlando

It's a privilege to commend this able and edifying treatment of the Lord's Supper. Its consideration of the Table's significance, followed by a number of brief meditations stemming from Griffith's own ministering there over the years, is biblically and theologically sound and insightful throughout. Here indeed is a feast for all who value their participation in the sacrament, but especially for pastors, whether beginning or experienced, looking for help in making their own ministering at the Table more meaningful and honoring to the Lord.

—RICHARD B. GAFFIN JR., Professor of Biblical and Systematic  
Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary,  
Philadelphia

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*for* MINISTRY *at the* LORD'S TABLE

HOWARD GRIFFITH

  
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*To Jackie,  
my love, "heirs together of the grace of life."*

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# *Introduction*

The Lord's Supper has a central place in the life of every believer. God has placed it there, along with the ministry of the Word and baptism. Our Savior, Jesus Christ, promises to meet us and share fellowship with us at his Table. Yet too often, because of a lack of attention, the Supper does not have the richness and beauty due to it as the sign and seal of our union with the resurrected Christ. I hope to help the church to refocus its attention on our communion with Christ at the Supper by answering this question: how *should* we minister at the Lord's Table? As a pastor or leader, whether your church has a set liturgy for the Supper or not, you will need to guide God's people to look to him in faith and love as they commune with Christ at the Table. I provide here biblical Invitations and Meditations that will help you to build up the body of Christ to receive him at his covenant meal. God has "spread the feast" for his people, but it is your task also to do this. As you minister these "visible words" in faith, the body of Christ will be built up.

From its first worship service in June 1984, our newly planted church in Richmond, Virginia, observed the Lord's Supper. Gathered first and foremost to hear Christ's written Word, we also understood the Supper as a part of the ministry of the Word and believed that we should receive it as often as possible. The New Testament does not require the church to observe the Lord's Supper every week. But there is significant precedent for it in the Reformed tradition, and the leadership of our young church wanted to try it.<sup>1</sup> There was no

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old details the history of the Reformed churches' practice of the Supper in his massive study, *Holy Communion in the Piety of the Reformed Church*, ed. Jon D. Payne (Powder Springs, GA: Tolle Lege Press, 2013).

looking back! We ate and drank every week for the twenty-three years of my ministry there and were never sorry. God met us and nourished our faith.

Most of my efforts as a pastor have been given to preaching, the exposition and application of Holy Scripture. I believe in the power of the Holy Spirit working by and with the Word in the hearts of his people.<sup>2</sup> I believe that the sacraments were given, not as a substitute for the Word, but to enhance and seal the Word to our faith.<sup>3</sup> Christ gave us the Supper, wrote John Calvin, “to awaken, arouse, stimulate, and exercise the feeling of faith and love, and indeed, to correct the defect of both.”<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, once we had decided to observe the Supper every week, to be honest, I feared that the congregation might become bored. Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary was a place of outstanding instruction in Holy Scripture and Reformed theology. I grew in knowledge of the Christ of Scripture there. But I received very little instruction in the theology of the sacraments and almost no practice in conducting worship.<sup>5</sup> At All Saints Reformed Presbyterian Church, I feared that the Lord’s Table could become a rote, empty observance, something less than a means of God’s grace. My experience since then has reinforced that concern. In many churches the Lord’s Table is, in a way, silent. God always speaks through his Word, including this Word, but in too many places the Supper is a brief “add-on.” Sometimes the liturgy is unexamined, or the words of institution are even omitted altogether. This tends to silence a rich means of God’s comfort, assurance, and challenge to the church.

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2 See Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.5.

3 The word “sacrament” is used throughout to refer to baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the two rites instituted by Jesus for use in his church until he returns. If anyone prefers the term “ordinance,” that would make no theological difference in the presentation of this book.

4 *Inst.*, 2:1420 (4/17.42).

5 For the most part, this was due to my poor “theological eyesight.” I had been nurtured in the Christian life by outstanding mentors, but largely outside the life of the church.

In seminary I read the “Table Addresses” of Professor John Murray, delivered in his pastoral ministry in the Scottish Highlands.<sup>6</sup> John Murray’s ministry was, to me, the embodiment of Christ-exalting and biblical spirituality, based on his penetrating biblical theology. Murray’s exposition of Scripture was both exegetically profound and deeply edifying. In his situation, the ministry of the Lord’s Table was quite different than it would be in mine. There were “Communion seasons,” lengthy services, administered periodically. By contrast, our church planned to observe Communion each week. I needed to modify what Murray had done, but the principle of giving a specific Meditation seemed sound. As a minister of the Word, I had a responsibility to explain the Lord’s meaning in the Supper and to exhort the church to receive the riches of Christ. Christ is the food and drink of his people. He is our life. His Table is a feast. The task of “spreading the feast” for God’s people was before me. So, armed with Murray’s five “Table Addresses,” I set out to minister at the Lord’s Table for a lifetime.

We never regretted the decision to observe the Supper weekly. Our God never left us, week by week, without the blessing of communion with Jesus Christ. And, despite very imperfect presentations, there was always (to my amazement!) something important to say in introducing the Lord’s Supper.

From that experience, as I continued to study theology, I learned something vital, something I was unaware of as a young minister. The sacraments are as rich in blessings as is the Lord Jesus, whose covenant they seal. Like the New Testament itself, they preach the unsearchable riches of Christ. A growing grasp of the doctrine of union with Christ and of the covenant character of the Bible has caused my understanding of the value of the sacraments to grow dramatically. This is the trajectory of what I learned: Scripture itself is the book by which God

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<sup>6</sup> These marvelous addresses are found in John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 3, *The Life of John Murray: Sermons and Reviews*, ed. Iain H. Murray (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 275–88.

administers his covenant. The message of all Scripture is Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. He is the content and the Mediator of the covenant. Sacraments, in the hand of the Holy Spirit, seal Christ and his grace to believers. By them we grow in faith, hope, and love.

It seemed a good thing to try to write down a number of the “Meditations” that I gave over the years. That project has grown into this book. I offer them with the hope that they may help other ministers (especially young ones) to present the riches of God’s grace in Christ as they serve at the Lord’s Table.

Interest in the sacraments has grown vigorously in the last couple of decades.<sup>7</sup> Because we believe in the importance of the Holy Spirit’s ministry through *his* means of grace, this is a good thing, despite reservations that we may have about ecumenical programs. Still, I hear many conservative Protestants who express much stronger convictions about what the sacraments are *not* than about what they are: instruments of God’s grace. My hope is that these Meditations will strengthen the practice of the Lord’s Supper in the churches and will help believers to enjoy the ministry of Christ at his Table. There is more to say about the ministry of the Supper than I have written. This is an introduction to the subject. If the reader is challenged to consider the riches of Christ sealed there, this book will reach its goal.

Part 1, “Foundations,” is a brief theology of the Lord’s Supper. That subject has been treated well by other writers. I have not tried to be exhaustive. However, I address theology in chapter 1, because the sacraments have many disputed points. They come up in the Meditations from time to time, and it is fitting to give the reader my own understanding of scriptural teaching about them. Chapter 2 is about

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7 For example, see George Hunsinger, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let Us Keep the Feast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), who proposes a whole range of theses that would unify Eastern and Western Christianity around the actual presence of Christ’s body and blood, “transelemented” in the Eucharist. The pull of sacramentalism is strong in our modern world. I make clear below that I understand Scripture to teach that the sacraments are effective by faith alone.

inviting believers to participate in the Table fellowship.<sup>8</sup> Chapter 3 sets out the basic themes of the Lord's Supper from the apostle Paul's "words of institution" in 1 Corinthians 11:23–26. Every observance of the Supper should present the themes found there. Then I elaborate on those basic themes in the Meditations that follow in part 2.

Strictly speaking, the reader may go directly to part 2. This is the meat of the book, presenting twenty-eight Meditations. Each Meditation explores the text listed beneath its title. The order follows the history of God's covenant salvation. In the old covenant, God sanctified his people and promised that he would come to them and bless them. In chapter 4, I explore some of these promises or "anticipations." The texts were chosen because they are basic to the New Testament presentations of the Last Supper—old-covenant promises of the redemption that Christ would accomplish: the Passover, covenant ratification at Sinai, the promised eschatological feast, and the suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. The message of the New Testament is that Christ has come, fulfilling the promises. The Meditations in chapter 5 examine the central facets of what God accomplished in Jesus' death and resurrection. These seven Meditations are based on New Testament texts that teach the nature of Christ's sacrifice on the cross (sacrifice, ransom, propitiation, reconciliation), accomplishing the redemption planned in eternity and promised in the Old Testament. The texts are from the Gospels and Epistles.

We live in the final era of redemptive history, the time of union with the resurrected Christ. Chapter 6 explores some of the immeasurable riches of this union. These fourteen Meditations explore the benefits of redemption applied: justification, ongoing forgiveness, sanctification, adoption, purity, fellowship in the body of Christ, reconciliation between believers, church unity, the strengthening of faith

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8 The traditional term for what I describe in this chapter is "fencing the Table." I am perfectly happy with that expression, but I believe that "inviting" is, well, more inviting, without obscuring what Scripture requires us to say in public worship.

and repentance, and the glorious hope of resurrection life with God. Many more could have been added, especially from the Old Testament. But these will, I hope, stimulate the thinking of the minister.

I assume that, in ministering at the Lord's Table, the pastor should

1. introduce the Supper (give a Meditation), then
2. invite believers to the Table, then
3. read the words of institution of the Supper (Matthew 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:19–20; or 1 Corinthians 11:23–26), and
4. pray for God's blessing on the meal.

I will mention below that, because the Word of God is what makes the sacrament a sign, it is indispensable. A "Table Meditation" is not. The whole worship service should be kept to a reasonable length. Thus I do not assume that a Meditation must be given, or must be given every time. Nor do I wish the minister to compose two sermons for each worship service. Hence the Meditations here are suggestive and brief. They may be used either in whole or in part. However, brevity does not suggest triviality. The words with which the Supper is administered ought to set a gospel-theological framework around the sacrament. Faith, hope, and love are the goal: these come from the Spirit shining on his Word. I hope that these Meditations will stimulate thought, prayer, and joy and will lead to the development of each pastor's *own* way of addressing the congregation at the Table.

I wish to thank the Board of Trustees of Reformed Theological Seminary, who granted me a sabbatical leave in the fall semester of 2013 to complete this work. I also wish to thank my colleagues at Reformed Theological Seminary in Washington, DC—Peter Lee, Scott Redd, Geoff Sackett, and Chad Van Dixhoorn—for their encouragement, prayers, and wisdom. I am deeply grateful for mentors: John H. Gerstner, Meredith G. Kline—of blessed memory—Sinclair B.



Ferguson, and Richard B. Gaffin Jr. Each continues to teach me. And then there's my wife, Jackie. She is God's greatest gift and joy to me in this life. I thank God for every day that he gives me with her. This book is the result of her constant encouragement and perspective. She has served me in more ways than I can possibly say.

May the triune God, who has spread this joyful feast, strengthen the church as we eat and drink with Jesus Christ.

— PART ONE —

# **F o u n d a t i o n s**

# Theology

This is a book about ministry at the Lord’s Table, not a systematic theology. But, of course, everyone has a theology, and the Meditations for the Lord’s Table, offered in part 2, express one too. I need to explain a number of points about the gospel, the sacraments, the covenant, and the Lord’s Supper—points that I assume in what I write below. Since I mean these talks to be practically and pastorally beneficial to many, I have tried not to be too wordy. (I recognize that I raise a number of complex theological points. A full discussion is beyond the scope of this book.<sup>1</sup>)

I write as a Reformed theologian and pastor, reading Holy Scripture in the line of John Calvin and the Reformed confessional tradition. As John Calvin wrote, “The sacraments take their virtue from the Word, when it is preached intelligibly.”<sup>2</sup> That means that I understand the Lord’s Supper as a sign and seal of our faith-union with Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> Richard B. Gaffin spells out the three aspects of union with

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1 For excellent presentations, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), ch. 9; and G. C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, trans. Hugo Bekker, *Studies in Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969). Many important questions, such as those related to ordination, are addressed in these theologies.

2 John Calvin, *Short Treatise on the Lord’s Supper*, trans. J. K. S. Reid, *Library of Christian Classics* 22 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 161. Calvin’s *Short Treatise* of 1541 is a theological gem.

3 See Calvin, *Inst.*, book 3 in its entirety and 2:1276–1428 (4/14–17). Richard B. Gaffin Jr. unfolds the relationship of Calvin’s doctrine of salvation to that of the Westminster Standards in “Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 65, no. 2 (2003): 165–79.

Christ in Paul's writings: predestinarian union (salvation planned in eternity), redemptive-historical union (salvation accomplished by the Son of God, once, for all time, for the entire church, in his death and resurrection), and existential union (salvation applied to the individual, in his own lifetime, by the Holy Spirit). The Meditations here are spoken to those who share this threefold union with Christ—that is, to professing believers. Let me unpack that further.

## GOSPEL

As I understand the apostle Paul, the heart of the gospel is union with the once crucified, now resurrected, Jesus Christ, by faith alone.<sup>4</sup> Guilty and helpless in themselves, believers, by God's gracious action, nevertheless receive what is now Christ's as the result of his saving death and resurrection. In an important summary statement, Paul wrote, "Because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). It is a rich idea, as well as a beautifully simple one. When we are joined to him by faith, we receive the riches of his saving work.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4 that at the center of his gospel (the things "of first importance") is Jesus Christ in his death for our sins and his resurrection on the third day, both as the necessary fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus Christ and what God accomplished through his ministry, once, for all time, is the basis of salvation. Fulfilling all the promises of the biblical covenants, God established the new covenant in Jesus' blood. This is the final, superlative, and unsurpassable expression of God's covenant bond with his people.

Paul's phrase "for our sins" summarizes our need. Since birth, we have each been guilty of the transgression of God's law, of rebellion

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<sup>4</sup> For a thorough presentation, see Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), especially 40–46.

against our rightful Creator and Lord. God's righteous reaction to our sins is holy wrath. However, our guilt also entails our corruption and aversion of heart to God's holy person and his standards. Thus, as Paul puts it, we and all of humanity are completely helpless—guilty, enslaved, and perverse in our rebellion against him. Our first father, Adam, willfully put us in this position (see Rom. 5:12–21). However, God is rich in mercy, and on account of his free grace he sent his eternal Son to save us by his death and resurrection.

Whatever we needed—and we needed everything—Jesus Christ accomplished for us in these climactic events. Paul summarizes this by writing that Christ “was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). The Father raised him up and exalted him to his right hand in his ascension into heaven. From there Christ bestowed the Holy Spirit on the church, on the day of Pentecost, as his personal representative (Acts 2:32–33). Today the Spirit gives us life by working faith in us and so uniting us to our living head. He indwells and overcomes the resistance of rebels, sweetly drawing them to the Savior.

The term “head” brings into view that Christ is our representative before God.<sup>5</sup> As the “second Adam” and the “last Adam,”<sup>6</sup> he acted in the place of God's elect people to meet the twofold demand of the covenant broken in Adam. In our place and for us, in other words, Jesus obeyed his Father in all things and suffered death as our substitute. By this death he turned away God's righteous wrath. In Jesus' obedience, God provided an obedience that meets the demands of his law. God provided satisfaction for the righteous demand of his offended justice through Jesus' suffering and death. God then raised him bodily from the grave on the third day.<sup>7</sup>

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5 Covenant theology uses the biblical term “Mediator” to summarize Christ's work in its many aspects. See 1 Timothy 2:5–6; Hebrews 9:15; 12:24.

6 See Romans 5:12–21; 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 44–49.

7 In the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, this is “the redemption purchased by Christ” (question and answer 29).

Paul, in his apostolic, God-breathed proclamation, interprets Jesus' resurrection as his "redemption" from the consequences of our sins. Jesus did not, of course, need to be redeemed himself, since he had no sin (see 2 Cor. 5:21). This is what God accomplished in him *for us*. Paul uses the ideas of "justification" (e.g., Acts 26:18; Rom. 3:24, 26, 28, 30; 4:2, 5, 25), "adoption" (Rom. 8:15, 23; Gal. 4:5), and "sanctification" (Rom. 6:19, 22; 1 Cor. 1:2, 30; 6:11; Eph. 5:26) to describe the saving benefits that believers receive. These benefits belong to believers because they belong first to Christ as resurrected. Sin, alienation, and death were Christ's portion, as (and only because) he suffered "for us." But when God raised him up, he declared Jesus the "Righteous One" (Acts 22:14). In other words, God justified Christ. Unlike us, he was *not* guilty, and that is what God declared by the action of raising him from death (1 Tim. 3:16).<sup>8</sup> He was declared righteous by the act of resurrection.

Likewise, the Father "adopted" Christ, or, in Paul's words, declared him "Son of God in power" by his resurrection (Rom. 1:3–4). Weakness and suffering had been his experience and his burden as he came into our cursed world to save us. Glory was his as God's eternal equal. Though he was the eternal Son of God, he took on our weakness when he took our flesh in Mary's womb. That weakness, and indeed accursedness, reached its nadir in his sufferings on the cross. But God put all that behind his Son when he raised him in power. Weakness, accursedness, and death now have no power over him. Last, though he never committed sin, nor was ever inclined to do so, Jesus came under sin's domination, or power, in his death. Sin oppressed him like an evil lord. But, again, God delivered him from

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8 The word ἐδικαιώθη (*edikaiōthēi*), which the ESV text of this verse translates as "vindicated," can also be translated as "justified" (see note here in the ESV). Richard B. Gaffin Jr. argues that "justified" is the proper rendering (see his *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* [1978; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987], 119–22). Jesus' resurrection as last Adam was God's effective declaration of his perfect obedience.

that power by raising him. Now sin has no power whatsoever over him (see Rom. 6:10).<sup>9</sup>

That is gospel good news, because when we simply trust in him, we too receive life from the dead—we are justified, adopted, and sanctified. These gifts show that as believers we are united with the resurrected Christ.<sup>10</sup> We have received the judicial verdict “righteous” (Christ’s righteousness “counted” as ours). Every sin is forgiven. Likewise, we have been adopted into the Father’s family. And we also have been freed from sin’s power. Every benefit of the grace of God is found in union with the resurrected Christ. Christ is all in all. “The risen, exalted Christ is what he now is, with his benefits in their saving power.”<sup>11</sup> God has dealt with our guilt decisively (see Rom. 4:6–8). God has removed the alienation, welcoming us forever as his children (see Gal. 3:26). We know him as our Father. God has given us new power over the remains of sin in this life (see Rom. 6:10–12). We are no longer enslaved to sin.

These riches, to be had by faith in the resurrected Christ, are, with him, the content of the Christian gospel. The Lord’s Supper seals that gospel to our hearts.

## SACRAMENTS

“Sacrament” is the word used by the historic church to describe circumcision, the Passover, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper, “signs and seals”

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9 Sinclair B. Ferguson develops this in *The Holy Spirit*, *Contours of Christian Theology*, ed. Gerald S. Bray (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 103–6. See also Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* (1978; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987).

10 See Westminster Larger Catechism, question and answer 69: “What is the communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ? The communion in grace which the members of the invisible church have with Christ is their partaking of the virtue of his mediation, in their justification, adoption, and sanctification, and whatever else, in this life, manifests their union with him.”

11 I am indebted to Dr. Richard B. Gaffin for this sentence, but I am unable to locate its source.

of God's gracious covenant relationship.<sup>12</sup> Circumcision and Passover were Old Testament rites, baptism and the Supper the continuing rites of the new covenant. God himself authored, or instituted, sacraments as instruments alongside his Word to communicate his grace to his covenant people.<sup>13</sup> In the view of the Protestant churches, "grace" in Scripture is not a "material something" (something "in" us<sup>14</sup>), but God's personal and unmerited favor, sovereignly exercised toward the guilty, transforming the whole person.<sup>15</sup> "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (Rom. 9:15). By grace, God calls us into union with Christ and, in that union, justifies and sanctifies.<sup>16</sup> It is pure gift; therefore, only God can show this saving grace to people, and only he can specify *how* he will do it. The Bible tells us that he does this by the Word and by sacraments.<sup>17</sup>

After their fall into sin, amazingly, God did not cease speaking to our first parents, Adam and Eve. Rather, he reversed their new, sinful allegiance to Satan, renewing his relationship with them, and promised them mercy in the redeeming work of Christ (Gen. 3:15). They

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12 I refer to the historic Protestant understanding of the sacraments.

13 See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:468–82.

14 Broadly speaking, by contrast, the medieval understanding of grace was something like a substance, supernaturally poured into the soul. Roger Haight writes, "Since the time of Aquinas, the term *grace* designated primarily, although not exclusively, 'created grace,' a habit or quality of the human soul, infused by God" ("Sin and Grace," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, 2nd ed., ed. Francis S. Fiorenza and John P. Galvin [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011], 404, italics his). Haight contrasts this with contemporary Roman Catholic theology since Karl Rahner, which identifies grace as God's orientation to all human beings always. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church with Modifications from the Editio Typica*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 354 (paragraph 1266), which clearly sounds the medieval note; as well as Berkouwer, *Sacraments*, 143; and Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 517.

15 See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:92–93.

16 Justification and sanctification are distinct benefits of union with Christ. They are distinct from each other but inseparable in the believer. See Westminster Larger Catechism, question and answer 69.

17 The whole creation bears witness to God (Rom. 1:19–21), but it does not reveal his plan of salvation. Christ's lordship does not imply that he is incarnate in all things, nor does his incarnation give saving power to the elements of creation.



believed this promise. Thus we have the first instance of saving grace, revealed and effective for sinful people. We will say more about God's covenant of grace below, but it was by his sovereign choice then, and ever since, that God communicated "the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure" (Eph. 1:9 ASV) to save rebels and become their Friend, their Lord, their Husband, and their Father. Holy Scripture itself is the record of the developing history of God's saving acts for his people and his verbal interpretation of those acts. Think, for example, of God redeeming his people from Egypt in the exodus and the Scripture that followed, written by Moses. Every saving work that God did in history led to, and was fulfilled finally by, God's Son (see Heb. 1:1–2). For example, Christ is the heir of all God's promises to Abraham (Gal. 3:16). In 2 Corinthians 1:20, Paul writes, "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory." Christ, as the fulfillment of every covenant promise, is the Father's Yes. As the Head and Savior of the church, he leads the church in its "Amen."<sup>18</sup> Holy Scripture plays its part in God's saving activity as words of divine revelation. Through that Word, proclaimed by prophets, apostles, and now by other ministers, God reveals his will to save a people and calls them powerfully and effectively into fellowship with Christ.

To that Word of God, with all its rich contents, God has added "signs" and "seals." Many times in history God added signs to his words (e.g., the rainbow, Gen. 9:11–15; circumcision, Gen. 17:11; Jesus' miraculous multiplication of the loaves, John 6:27; and so on). Signs confirmed his promises to the faith of his people. Until Jesus returns, sacraments are the regular and permanent signs and seals of God's grace in Christ, which is continually proclaimed in his Word. When we say "sign" in reference to the sacraments, we mean, in the

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18 I am indebted to Dr. Nelson D. Kloosterman for this sentence ("Proverbs 22:6 and Covenant Succession," in *To You and Your Children: Examining the Biblical Doctrine of Covenant Succession*, ed. Benjamin K. Wikner [Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2005], 56).

words of Herman Bavinck, something that “images and assures us of the action of Christ.”<sup>19</sup> So, for example, the water of baptism images the washing away of the pollution of sins by the blood and Spirit of Christ. Christ does the washing, but his action is invisible. Baptism is a “sign” of it. The believer receives it as a seal of what is “signed.” Baptism seals to my faith that I have been cleansed by God.

An important point that distinguishes the Reformed tradition’s understanding of the sacraments is that the biblical signs are primarily words *from* God about God’s saving actions, not first about human faith, necessary as faith is. There is an inherent theological logic here, grounded in biblical religion: God sovereignly acts to save. Only then do we respond in faith. I do not deny that we confess faith as we partake,<sup>20</sup> but rather I deny that the sacraments are *our* word first of all. They are, first of all, God’s words. The sacraments have an objective character, as the promises do.<sup>21</sup> The signs speak of God’s grace, and faith is to be strengthened by them.

Notice Paul’s description of Abraham’s circumcision in Romans 4:11: “He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe.” Paul identifies circumcision as a sign and a seal of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith. Some would read Romans 4:11 as saying that it was a sign and seal of Abraham’s faith. But Paul does not say that. He says it is a sign and seal of the righteousness, which is received by faith. In other words, it was a sign and seal of the righteousness that God promised to provide Abraham in his covenant (see Gen. 17:11–12). Abraham received the benefits of the salvation that would be secured by Christ, the very righteousness of God revealed in the gospel, by

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19 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:475.

20 Clearly we do: “you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).

21 Augustine called them “visible words” (“Tractate 80 on John 15:1–3,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956], 344).

faith in the promise. Circumcision was a sign and seal to him of that gift of righteousness. What about to us, who live after Christ's death and resurrection? We receive that same gift of righteousness, by faith in the promise, as it has now been fulfilled in Christ. The sign is also a seal: it confirms to the believing conscience that that righteousness belongs personally to us.

This implies that sacraments are indispensable for our faith, but only as they depend on the Word of the gospel. We must believe the gospel Word to be saved.<sup>22</sup> The sacraments strengthen faith that rests upon that Word.<sup>23</sup> It is our proneness to unbelief, even as believers, that God addresses by adding sacraments to the promises of the Bible.<sup>24</sup> But if they seal the biblical Word, what exactly do they say? What may amaze some of us who were not raised in a rich sacramental tradition is this: their content is the whole content of the Bible, Jesus Christ himself in every dimension of his ministry and the salvation he bestows. As Bavinck writes, "Christ—the full, rich, total Christ, both according to his divine and his human natures, with his person and work, in the state of his humiliation and in that of his exaltation—is the 'internal matter,' the 'heavenly substance,' the thing signified in the sacrament."<sup>25</sup>

This is why the Bible describes the benefits of the sacraments as

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22 Bavinck writes, "Nor are they absolutely necessary for salvation, for Scripture binds salvation only to faith (John 3:16; Mark 16:16)" (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:489).

23 Separated from the Word, the sacraments are not indispensable. A person may be saved without baptism and the Lord's Supper, as the thief on the cross was (Luke 23:42–43), but not without faith in the gospel. That was, of course, an abnormal situation, but it nevertheless illustrates the relationship of Word and sacrament. Bavinck writes, "The sacraments do not work faith, but reinforce it, as a wedding ring reinforces love" (*ibid.*).

24 The Belgic Confession (1561), article 33, reads: "We believe that our gracious God, taking account of our weakness and infirmities, has ordained the sacraments for us, thereby to seal unto us his promises, and to be pledges of the good will and grace of God toward us, and also to nourish and strengthen our faith; which He has joined to the word of the gospel, the better to present to our senses both that which He declares to us by His Word, and that which He works inwardly in our hearts, thereby confirming in us the salvation which he imparts to us."

25 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:477.

*saving* benefits: forgiveness, regeneration, sanctification, washing, and so on (see Acts 22:16; Rom. 6:3–4; 1 Cor. 10:16; and others). We may speak of the signs as though they were the saving realities, but that is the correct way to speak of them only because God has made them *signs* of those realities.<sup>26</sup> Where faith is present—which is to say, where a person is in Christ—the signs actually convey Christ. Here, like the promises of God, the signs “speak,” providing fellowship with the living Lord (see 1 Cor. 10:16–21). So, with Calvin, I reject the idea of the sacraments as “empty signs.” They are not Christ. But God communicates Christ through them, to the believer, along with the Word.<sup>27</sup>

In the last couple of decades, interest in the sacraments has increased among evangelical Christians. For those of us who believe in justification by faith alone, this might be a cause for concern. Should symbols take the place of the promises of God? Are more evangelicals turning from faith to ritual? No doubt some are. The turn toward the sacraments might be a turn away from the gospel of free grace in Christ, if it is unthinking. But, in Scripture, the sacraments do not communicate the grace of God apart from faith in the gospel that brings us Christ. Thus a renewed interest in the sacraments need *not* be an obscuring of the gospel. In Holy Scripture the sacraments signify and seal that union with Christ that the Spirit effects by faith. If, as the Bible presents them, God has ordained the sacraments to strengthen faith in Christ, diminishing them will impoverish faith in Christ rather than protect it.

Two more factors tie the sacraments and the Word of God together. First, like the Word, the sacraments are instruments in the

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<sup>26</sup> See Westminster Confession of Faith, 27.3.

<sup>27</sup> “Unless a man means to call God a deceiver, he would never dare assert that an empty symbol is set forth by him. Therefore if the Lord truly represents the participation in his body through the breaking of bread, there ought not to be the least doubt that he truly presents and shows his body” (Calvin, *Inst.*, 2:1371 [4/17.10]). I will say more about the manner of Christ’s presence below.

hand of the Holy Spirit. Neither minister nor water, bread nor wine, has the power to effect communion with God. He is the worker, the One who comes to strengthen faith through their use. The Word of God itself falls on deaf ears unless God opens our hearts, as he did Lydia's when she heard Paul's preaching (see Acts 16:14). Likewise, the sacraments are effective for faith only as the Spirit of Christ applies Christ to our hearts through them. And, since he has promised to use them, we should employ them with expectation.

Second, like the Word, only the response of (Spirit-worked) faith appropriates, or receives, Christ in the sacraments. Unless the promise of the gospel is believed, Christ remains outside us. We receive no benefit from what he has done. Note Calvin's statement at the beginning of book 3 of his *Institutes*: "First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us."<sup>28</sup> Exactly the same is true of the sacraments. They emblemize the saving work of Christ and seal it when we receive them by faith. Hence, like the Word, they always call us to deeper faith in Christ. Like the gospel, the sacraments are effective by faith alone. The Spirit working with the sacramental Word strengthens faith. God works and we believe, receiving Christ.<sup>29</sup>

## COVENANT

The cup in the Lord's Supper signifies "the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:25). Much could be (and has been) written on the

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:537 (3/1.1).

<sup>29</sup> "Therefore, I make such a division between the Spirit and the sacraments that the power to act rests with the former, and the ministry alone is left to the latter—a ministry empty and trifling, apart from the action of the Spirit, but charged with great effect when the Spirit works within, and manifests his power" (*ibid.*, 2:1284 [4/14.9]).

subject of the covenant relation between God and his people.<sup>30</sup> But, as a brief summary, my understanding of the whole of biblical teaching is that “covenant” is a matter of a living relationship of mutual, voluntary commitment between God and man, created in God’s image, binding each to the other. God establishes this bond sovereignly and calls upon man to respond in faith and obedience. This is momentous, of course, because the very existence of a religious bond assumes God’s sovereign self-commitment. God was free *not* to bind himself to his creatures, but he chose to do it!<sup>31</sup>

Before the fall into sin, God promised a higher life to Adam and his descendants, should Adam pass the test of obedience.<sup>32</sup> He failed the test of the covenant of works, rebelling against his God, and that brought the human race into bondage to sin, death, and curse (see Rom. 5:12–21), as well as bringing a curse on the whole non-image-bearing creation (Rom. 8:20–22). Nevertheless, God did not abandon his children. In place of his threatened righteous wrath, God showed mercy by reinstating the relationship with Adam’s chosen descendants (Gen. 3:15–17).<sup>33</sup>

But, with the fall, the situation had changed fundamentally. Man is in rebellion. In his grace, God maintains continuity in the relationship, but man now needs redemption. Thus the covenant will have to provide it, and that redemption must come about in pure sovereignty,

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30 I am deeply indebted to Meredith G. Kline’s biblical-theological exposition of the divine covenants. See his *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, KS: Two Age Press, 2000). Nevertheless, I find myself in closer agreement with O. Palmer Robertson’s overall presentation in *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), especially regarding the Mosaic covenant. Apart from Robertson’s rejection of the so-called *pactum salutis* (which I do not reject), his overall presentation is quite consistent with historic Reformed theology. Cf., for example, Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:193–232.

31 Just as God was free not to create the world, but he chose to do so. See Westminster Confession of Faith, 7.1.

32 See Westminster Confession of Faith, 7.2, on the “covenant of works.” Bavinck argues for this understanding in *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 564–80.

33 See Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, 93–107.

apart from human contribution. Human beings are friends of Satan, not of God. They are offensive to the Holy One. Therefore, after the fall, God forges his relationship with fallen man with sacrificial blood. That blood represents both God's righteous judgment on human sin and his self-giving redemption from human sin. Palmer Robertson defines covenant as "a bond-in-blood. It involves commitments with life and death consequences."<sup>34</sup> Man is still God's image, though a distorted one, so he will need to be *changed* by grace if he is to believe and obey God. God both establishes the relationship and works sovereignly in the hearts of his chosen so that they are made willing and able to believe and obey.<sup>35</sup> In Augustine's words, he "grants what he commands."<sup>36</sup>

Reformed theology has called the covenant relationship, after the fall, "the covenant of grace." It is a relationship of mutual commitment between God and believing sinners, which is to say, a bond of religious fellowship initiated by God. It is not a contract but a sovereignly "imposed" relationship. For example, when God called Abram to leave his home, Genesis 12:1–3 repeats the personal pronoun "I" numerous times, indicating the Lord's direction and authority. The Lord made promises to Abram; he did not negotiate with him. There, and in all following covenant dealings, he requires a response: trusting his promises, obeying his commands, being loved and loving. Faith and obedience bring his blessing. Unbelief and disobedience bring his judgment.

Throughout Scripture the covenant relationship is expressed in the repeated summary formula, "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Jer. 7:23; see also Ex. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 11:4; Rev. 21:7).

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>35</sup> See Westminster Confession of Faith, 7.3. This obedience is simply a fruit of Spirit-worked faith. It is not an instrument by which they appropriate God's promise of eternal life. Cf. Westminster Confession of Faith, 14.2.

<sup>36</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions: A New Translation by Henry Chadwick*, Oxford World's Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 10.29.

This formula captures the dynamic and gracious relationship throughout the history of salvation in the successive covenants (with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets, and the “new covenant”).

The covenants are described in Scripture as both “many” (see Eph. 2:12) and “one” (see Ps. 105:8–15, where Scripture generalizes promises made to several individuals by using the term “covenant” in the singular).<sup>37</sup> This indicates their rich diversity. But in their diversity they are related to one another organically. In each successive covenant, God both fulfills his previous promises and expands on them. All of them reach their final fulfillment in the new covenant established in Jesus’ death and resurrection.<sup>38</sup>

Christ, both before and since his incarnation in history, serves as the Mediator of the covenant (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:15; 12:24). In other words, he acts for God toward us and for us toward God. Christ brings the benefits of the covenant to us as God, and he represents us before God. The “new” and final covenant was finally ratified in his sacrificial blood (Luke 22:20). This is the context of the Lord’s Supper. God’s people enjoy communion with him as new covenant Mediator.

Thus, despite all the variation and development in the history of redemption, there is a basic and profound unity in the religion of the Bible. Old Testament religion is the same as New Testament religion. The classic way of stating the relationship of the Old and New Testaments is that the covenants are one in “substance” but different in “administration.”<sup>39</sup> They all administer Christ, who is their substance. All the covenants (or the one covenant of grace) have the same promises, the same Christ, and the same benefits: forgiveness and eternal

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37 Bruce K. Waltke writes, “The psalmist’s recounting of the successive covenant promises and renewals with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (26:3–4; 28:13–15; 35:11–12) praises God for a unified covenant act. (Ps. 105:8–15; cf. Mic. 7:20) The progressive promises and renewals constitute a complete covenant commitment of grace” (*Genesis: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000], 246).

38 See Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants*, ch. 3, “The Unity of the Divine Covenants,” and ch. 4, “The Diversity of the Divine Covenants.”

39 Westminster Confession of Faith, 7.6.



life.<sup>40</sup> As God reveals his grace more fully in each, his people are enabled to respond to that grace more fully.

How do they differ? They differ fundamentally as promise and fulfillment. The Old Testament, in its organic development, records the promises of the covenant of grace. For example, God promised Abraham the land of Canaan in Genesis 15:18–21. That promise was fulfilled in a partial, “typical” way through the conquest of the land by Joshua. But finally, its fulfillment will be the meek inheriting the earth, as Jesus promised (Matt. 5:5), when he returns in glory (see Heb. 4:8). Paul sees that God promised Abraham that he would be heir of the *world* (Rom. 4:13). The redemption promised in the Old has been fulfilled in the New.

The New Testament proclaims the inaugurating fulfillment of those promises in the comprehensive work of Jesus Christ. An example that virtually all Christians recognize is the Old Testament sacrificial system. The blood of sacrificial animals could not actually atone for sins, but Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross did (Heb. 10:4–9). All the Old Testament institutions, in their great variety,<sup>41</sup> called “types” or pictures, were God revealing beforehand what he would finally do in the work of his Son. In his death and resurrection, along with Pentecost, the fulfillment has begun.

This unity of covenant religion between Old and New Testaments is basic to our understanding of the Lord’s Supper. Both Old and New Testaments teach us much about the riches of Jesus Christ, and both call us to fellowship with him, to faith and to obedience. The Supper seals those riches to our hearts. The benefits that make

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40 See Calvin, *Inst.*, 1:428–64 (2/10–11).

41 See 1 Peter 1:10–12. I have in mind prophets, priests, kings, land, temple, sacrifices, feasts, the exodus event, the Paschal Lamb, and so on—God-ordained persons, actions, events, and institutions—all intended to present a picture of the work Christ would fulfill. Cf. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 144–48. Citations refer to the reprint edition.

up our salvation belong alike to Old and New Testament believers. Old-covenant faith and new-covenant faith bring the same salvation (see Heb. 11:1–12:2). The difference, of course, is that now Christ has come in the fullness of time and has accomplished the promised redemption in history. Since all the sacrificial types have been fulfilled, a necessary implication is that there is no longer any “ceremonial” observance in the ministry of the church. The Holy Spirit, with the Bible and sacraments as his instruments, administers union with the exalted Lord Jesus Christ.

We wait for Christ to return (1 Thess. 1:9–10). The new covenant has been inaugurated, but it has not yet been consummated. There is a judgment to come with its final rewards and final punishments. Those who use the sacraments, like those who hear the Word, are called by God to believe in Christ. Not all believe, however; not even all who profess to believe (see John 8:30–47). This fact obscures neither the truthfulness of the Word nor of the sacraments. But it does mean that some who make use of the sacraments, in unbelief, will find them functioning to bring not blessing but judgment. That is part of the “warning message” of the covenant of grace. God is very patient. But where his gospel is finally not received in faith, God’s curse will follow. There will be greater judgment to those who are included in the covenant but who do not believe and repent. They have a lawful place in the administration of the covenant in history but do not partake of Christ (see Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; Rom. 2:28–29; 9:6, 11–14; Phil. 3:3; Heb. 10:26–31).<sup>42</sup> These texts indicate that unbelief and impenitence among God’s covenant people have never been acceptable to him, either in the Old or New Testaments. To put it theologically, to be a member of the covenant people, but not to be united to Christ by faith, will lead to his judgment. Most of the time,

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<sup>42</sup> The gift of regeneration, and the faith and repentance that flow from it, was not theirs. But we should not conclude that this was somehow acceptable to God. The unregenerate are no less guilty for their sins in the Old Testament than in the New.

this is invisible to us in the ministry of the church. The day of the Lord will reveal the truth of men's hearts. Until then we continue, in ministry as in the whole Christian life, to walk by faith, not by sight.

The "new covenant" in Scripture is inseparable from another climactic reality announced by Jesus and the apostles: the coming of the kingdom of God. That kingdom is the comprehensive fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament (see Mark 1:15). It is God's final order for the creation. The kingdom arrived with the coming of Christ—especially his death and subsequent exaltation to God's right hand—and, as inaugurated, it will be consummated at his return in glory. It includes nothing less than the salvation of sinners and the renewal of the entire cosmos from the consequences of sin and death.<sup>43</sup> Jesus' meals with his disciples anticipated the final fellowship of the kingdom of God. The Last Supper was Jesus' last such meal. Paul calls the Spirit, who ministers now, "firstfruits" (Rom. 8:23) and "down payment" (2 Cor. 5:5 HCSB) of believers' final redemption. As believers are united to Christ, they enter God's kingdom and await its consummation (Col. 1:13–14). Hope of the consummated kingdom too is signified and sealed in the Lord's Supper. As we await his return in glory, we remember his saving death and feed on his body and blood.

## LAST SUPPER AND LORD'S SUPPER

We have accounts of the Last Supper, at which Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, in Matthew 26, Mark 14, and Luke 22, as well as 1 Corinthians 11. There are slight variations of wording between these

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<sup>43</sup> Richard B. Gaffin Jr. is the source of this sentence (lecture, Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia, PA). Geerhardus Vos summarizes Jesus' understanding of the kingdom: "To him the kingdom exists . . . where not merely God is supreme, for that is true at all times and in all circumstances, but where God supernaturally carries through his supremacy against all opposing powers and brings man to the willing recognition of the same" (*The Kingdom of God and the Church* [1903; repr. with additions and corrections, Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972], 50).

accounts, which are somewhat difficult to harmonize.<sup>44</sup> These different accounts give the different authors' perspectives on Jesus' words. The healthy impulse to harmonize them arises from the conviction that each gospel along with 1 Corinthians, and all together, present the events and words truly. Because all Scripture is God breathed (2 Tim. 3:16) and thus without error, we must hold this conviction.

A couple of insights follow. In light of the inerrancy of Scripture as God breathed, we should be certain that each account preserves Jesus' words truly, though not with maximal precision.<sup>45</sup> God's Word is true in all it affirms, whether or not we can see its harmony at all points. God, of course, perfectly understands the harmony of what are his own accounts of the Last Supper, taking fully into account the several human authors' distinct concerns. And, as Vern Poythress writes concerning the Gospels' accounts,

Because God is the divine author of each Gospel, each Gospel represents not only a distinct *human* perspective, but also a distinct *divine* perspective. God speaks not only what is common to the Gospels—some kind of “core”—but what is distinct in each one . . . through the Holy Spirit, he empowered them to write exactly what they wrote. All of it is God's Word.<sup>46</sup>

This is true, then, of the texts that speak of the Supper. Second, the multiplicity of accounts presents us with a rich and nuanced di-

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44 Harmonization is certainly a worthy task, and in principle possible, but one I do not undertake. See I. Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (London: Paternoster, 1980; repr. Vancouver: Regent College, 2006); and Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. Norman Perrin (1977; repr., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) for the full discussion.

45 For a fine discussion of the relationship of Scripture's truthfulness to its precision, see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God, A Theology of Lordship 4* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 167–74.

46 Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 35, italics his.

vine revelation of the meaning of the Lord's Supper.<sup>47</sup> Working from these premises, I will seek to pay some attention to the various aspects of the presentation of the Supper in Scripture.

Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper as he ate his last Passover with the disciples.<sup>48</sup> His institution establishes the church's continuing understanding and mandate. God redeemed Israel from Egypt in the exodus. The first Passover sacrifice was the basis of that redemption (Ex. 12:13, 23, 27). In the Passover meal in the Old Testament, God met with his people and, on the basis of the sacrifice made and accepted (Ex. 12:27; 34:25), united himself with them in joyful celebration.<sup>49</sup>

Jesus' disciples dreaded his impending death. He chose the bread and wine of the Passover meal as signs of his body and blood, as they would soon be offered in sacrifice for them. By the bread and wine, he showed them that his death would bring about the forgiveness of the new covenant that was pictured and foretold in the Old Testament.

Jesus' sacrificial death fulfilled the Passover (and much besides) as the reality promised by the Old Testament symbols. Jesus' death was the substance of all the sacrifices of the Old Testament, which promised and prefigured it: the "sacrifice" of Isaac (Gen. 22), the Passover lamb (Ex. 12:26–27; 1 Cor. 5:6–8; 1 Peter 1:18–19), the blood of the covenant at Sinai (Ex. 24:8; Matt. 26:27–28), the suffering of the

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47 Bavinck writes, "The variant readings sufficiently demonstrate that Jesus no more prescribed a fixed and unchangeable formula at the Supper than he did in connection with baptism. It is even impossible to determine the literal words employed by Jesus on this occasion. He did not define exactly what had to be said at the Supper, but he described what it was and had to be" (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:547). This also entails, of course, the conclusion that Jesus' words were not a "consecration" formula.

48 Commentators debate this, but the conclusion remains sound. For example, Robert Letham disputes Passover as the occasion (*The Lord's Supper: Eternal Word in Broken Bread* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001], 4–5). For the arguments in its favor, see Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, 41–88; and Marshall, *Last Supper*, 57–80.

49 See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:542–43.

Servant of the Lord (Isa. 53:12; Matt. 26:28).<sup>50</sup> In Jeremiah 31:31 the Lord had promised to make a new covenant with his people. Jesus told the disciples that his blood is the true sacrifice that would effect that covenant (Luke 22:20) and bring about a new exodus of salvation for the church.

Let me say here that the Last Supper was not *itself* Jesus' sacrifice, and neither is the Lord's Supper a sacrifice.<sup>51</sup> It is served not on an altar but on a table.

The Passover lamb was sacrificed not at the Passover meal but before the meal. Jesus was sacrificed not at the meal but after the meal. So the Supper is a meal of fellowship with God on the *basis* of Jesus' historic sacrifice. In the Lord's Supper, the sacrifice, offered once for all time, is the presupposition, not the content, of the meal. The Last Supper sealed Jesus' sacrifice, *about to be offered* on the cross, to the twelve. Theological controversy must not blind us to the very obvious fact that Jesus spoke the words "This is my body" (Matt. 26:26–27; Mark 14:22, 24; Luke 22:19–20), and so on, to the *disciples*, not "to" the elements.<sup>52</sup> He spoke to the Twelve, building their faith, sealing what he was about to do on Calvary. The Lord's Supper seals the sacrifice, once offered on the cross, to believers. The Supper is the meal of the fellowship of blessing with God, achieved by Jesus' blood shedding. Its focus is not "elements" of bread and wine, but Jesus' death for us, which they show.

The characteristic pairing of words in Jesus' statements supports this position. Jesus called the bread and wine "my body" (Luke 22:19) and "my blood" (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24). This pairing of  $\sigma\omega\mu\acute{\alpha}$

50 See Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans. H. de Jongste (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), 425. Christ is our Passover lamb (1 Cor. 5:7). But it was not the Passover sacrifice, as such, to which he referred in his words about the bread. He distributed not the roast lamb, but bread, to represent his body given.

51 This is the unanimous testimony of the Reformed Confessions.

52 In other words, there is no notion in Scripture of a word of consecration that transforms bread and wine. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:463.

(*sōma*, “body”) and αἷμα (*haíma*, “blood”) should not be abstracted from their significance in covenant history, as undue stress on the idea of “elements” tends to do. The words signified death. Herman Ridderbos pinpoints their sense:

Body and blood undoubtedly occur here as the two components of man’s material make-up which are separated at *death*. And it is death that is meant here. For Jesus’ body is mentioned here as that which “is given for you” (Luke), and his blood as that which “is shed for many for the remission of their sins” (Matt. and Mark). Both this “given” and this “shed” refer to Jesus’ impending death.<sup>53</sup>

Jeremias comments, “Each of the two nouns presupposes a slaying that has separated flesh and blood.”<sup>54</sup> Scripture frequently speaks of Jesus’ death on the cross using the word “give/gave/given,” referring to Jesus’ self-offering, as in Mark 10:45; Galatians 1:4; 1 Timothy 2:6; and Titus 2:14.

More specifically, when Jesus said, “This is my body,” he referred not to what he was *breaking*, but to what he was *distributing*.<sup>55</sup> Jesus’ action of breaking the bread in no way suggested the violent tearing asunder of his body.<sup>56</sup> Rather, it was the customary action of the father

53 Ridderbos, *Coming of the Kingdom*, 424, italics his.

54 Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, 222. Thus, though Jesus’ words about the bread and his words about the cup were separated by the meal, they did not refer to different realities, such as Jesus’ presence (bread) and sacrifice (cup). They referred together to the sacrifice.

55 In Luke 22:19, “had given thanks” and “broke” and “gave” precede the “saying.”

56 Marshall writes, “‘Breaking’ is not an appropriate metaphor for killing, and the breaking of the bread is simply the preliminary to its distribution” (*Last Supper*, 86). In Luke 22:19, the present participle διδόμενον (*didómenon*, “given”) has a future sense, referring to Jesus’ imminent death. Compare the present participles ἐκχυννόμενον (*enchunnómenon*, “is poured out”) and παραδιδόντος (*paradidóntos*, “betrays”) in verses 20 and 21, which similarly refer to the immediate future.

of a family as he distributed bread at every meal.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, his statement “This cup . . . is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20), referred not to the action of pouring wine into the cup, but to the wine already poured into the cup. Jesus’ phrase τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν ἐκχυννόμενον (*to hyper humōn enchunnómenon*), “poured out for you” (Luke 22:20), almost certainly refers to the blood shedding that would occur in just a few hours, not to the pouring of the wine. We may see this more clearly by noticing that the parallel passages (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24) have “for many” in place of “for you.”<sup>58</sup> Reading the texts together, the variation from “for you” to “for many” signals that the recipients of the “pouring out” are a group much wider than the disciples present at the Last Supper (“you”). They are all those for whom his blood would be shed, the whole church throughout the ages. Jesus’ words in Matthew 26:28 strengthen this conclusion: “my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

57 Most of us are familiar with the King James rendering of 1 Corinthians 11:24, which reads, “broken for you.” We should note, however, that the word κλωμενον (*klōmenon*, “broken”) is not found in the best manuscript witnesses. It is almost certainly a scribal addition. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975) *ad loc.*, “derived from the preceding ἐκλάσεν.” The language of “breaking” does not describe the performing of sacrifices in the Old Testament. Further, if John 19:36 refers to the Passover lamb, “these things took place that the Scriptures might be fulfilled: ‘Not one of his bones will be broken,’” the idea of “breaking” the bread as referring to sacrificing Jesus’ body would be ruled out. Commentators differ widely over the Scripture to which John alludes in verse 36.

58 Herman N. Ridderbos writes, “When Jesus says ‘for this is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for many,’ it *cannot* refer to the action of pouring wine into the cup, but only to the distributing of the wine as the blood of Christ. And this for the simple reason that the pouring of the wine into the cup cannot possibly be linguistically denoted as a ‘shedding’ (*ekkeinin*). When Van der Leeuw writes that Jesus ‘poured out’ the wine as the blood of his new covenant and infers that in essence he was sacrificing himself at this meal, he only transfers his own ideas into the original text, and that in a very radical way. There is not the faintest suggestion in the text of a symbolic ‘pouring out’ of the wine into the cup. The parallelism between pouring out of wine and shedding of blood is perfectly alien to the text and to linguistic usage. Besides, from the Passover ritual, it may be inferred that the wine had been standing ready when Jesus applied the figure of his blood to it. What is symbolized, therefore, is not Christ’s self-surrender, but its fruits for the life of his followers. Not the altar, but the table, characterizes the activity at the Lord’s Supper. The sacrifice is the presupposition preceding this eating and drinking” (*Coming of the Kingdom*, 429–30, italics his). The “sacramental action” regarding the cup is not “pouring” any more than it is “shedding.”



The referent of the “pouring out,” providing the basis of “the forgiveness of sins,” can be no other than Jesus’ blood shedding on the cross.

Thus there is almost certainly no symbolic meaning intended for our “pouring” wine into a cup. The Lord’s Supper is not a sacrificial ritual, because the Last Supper was not one. When we obey his command, “Do this . . . ,” we do not reenact a sacrifice.

There has been, of course, controversy for centuries about what Jesus was distributing in the Last Supper. The teaching of the Roman Catholic Church (called “transubstantiation”) is that it became truly Jesus’ flesh and blood, though it continued to appear as bread and wine.<sup>59</sup> There is no evidence for that doctrine in the gospel accounts. Such a theological reading of the Lord’s Supper is, in fact, deeply unbiblical. It obscures the meaning of the Supper by focusing the attention of believers on the elements instead of on the significance of his unique death and their union with him. The Christ who was crucified for us has now been “crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death” (Heb. 2:9). God has glorified him, as the reward of his completed suffering, once for all (see Heb. 7:27; 9:25–28; 10:10).<sup>60</sup> His suffering fully satisfied the requirements of God’s justice for his people. The glorified Christ is not, and cannot be again, subject to humiliation, suffering, or sacrifice.<sup>61</sup>

Why then did Jesus command the disciples to eat and drink, and

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59 See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 383–85 (paragraphs 1373–77). This post-Vatican II document appeals also to the deliverances of the Council of Trent, which remain authoritative for Rome.

60 See also Herman Bavinck’s thorough and devastating critique of the doctrine of transubstantiation in *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:568–74. We may well ask what benefit the actual ingestion of Jesus’ flesh and blood would bring us. Otfried Hofius writes, “Just as the cup or its contents *is not* the New Covenant in the sense of substance, neither is the bread in a substantial sense the body of Christ” (“The Lord’s Supper and the Lord’s Supper Tradition: Reflections on 1 Corinthians 11:23b–25,” in *One Loaf, One Cup: Ecumenical Studies of 1 Cor 11 and Other Eucharistic Texts*, ed. Ben F. Meyer [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993], 100, italics his).

61 Calvin’s point that Christ’s true human body is subject to spatial limits—that he, as a human being, remains at God’s right hand—is as telling today as it was in the sixteenth century (*Inst.*, 2:1372–73 [4/17.12]).

to do so repeatedly? So that they might have the assurance of sins forgiven. The bread taken and eaten, the wine drunk, represent the application of salvation to believers, because Christ's words gave them and continue to give them that meaning. As believers receive them, they receive the salvation accomplished by his death.

The writing of the apostle Paul, as the earliest "commentator" on the Last Supper (1 Cor. 11:17–34), supports these conclusions. The Supper is a sacrificial meal, in which believers appropriate the benefits of the sacrifice by eating and drinking. Paul shows that this is his own understanding in a number of ways. He repeats the words of institution. He refers to the night in which Jesus was "delivered up"<sup>62</sup> (a solemnizing detail indicating that Jesus' death was the fulfillment of God's plan). He makes a direct connection in verses 26–27 between the bread and cup and "the Lord's death."

Ridderbos shows the importance of Paul's teaching in the previous chapter (1 Cor. 10:1–22) for the interpretation of chapter 11. Eating sacrifices at pagan temples is participation in a sacrificial meal, which indicates fellowship with demons. Drinking and eating are a "participation" in the body and blood of Christ at the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 10:16); "the cup of blessing that we bless" and "the bread that we break"—each is a *κοινωνία* (*koinōnía*). Surely, then, the Corinthians may not "be participants" also with demons (v. 20, *κοινωνοὺς*, *koinōnous*, from the same root). To eat sacrifices at the demons' table is to "participate" with them, as Israel does with the Lord when it eats the sacrificial meal (v. 18 uses the same noun, *κοινωνοὶ*, *koinōnoi*). In each case there is fellowship with the host of the meal by eating what has lain on the altar.

This helps us to see that the presence of Christ at the Lord's Table is not found in "elements," which, as Calvin would say, "bring him

62 This is the rendering of Herman Ridderbos. See his *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John R. deWitt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 417.

down” to us. Instead, Christ, as Lord at the Table, makes believers share in the benefits of his sacrificial death. There is a proper distinction between Jesus’ crucifixion and the atonement that God accomplished by it. It was not merely the events of those hours, but what God transacted in his plan of salvation through them, that is important for us. God interprets those events in Holy Scripture. The atonement means reconciliation *with God*, ransom paid *to God*, the propitiation *of God*, and so on. In the Supper, he makes us companions at his Table, meeting us as our reconciled God.

First Corinthians 10 helps us here as well. In verses 1–13, Paul compares the church to Israel in the wilderness. There is a covenant-historical analogy between Israel and the church. Paul identifies Israel as “our fathers” to the (Gentile) Corinthians in verse 1. What happened to them “typically” (τύποι, *typoi*, v. 6) is a warning “for us” (v. 6), “for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (v. 11). Israel committed idolatry, despite their privileges. “Most” (v. 5, or “some,” vv. 7–10) fell under God’s judgment. The Corinthian church must not follow their example (v. 7). In fact, the fathers’ overthrow in the wilderness is the basis of Paul’s warning, later in the chapter, against committing idolatry: “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry” (v. 14). This they must do rather than provoke Christ by sharing the table of demons (vv. 21–22) while seeking at the same time to participate in the Lord’s Table (v. 16).

How does this bear on the Lord’s Supper? In 10:1–5, Paul compares the privileges of Israel to those of the church. In doing so, he uses the language of the New Testament sacraments to describe God’s blessing on Israel. Israel was redeemed from Egypt by the glory-cloud presence of the Lord. Paul calls this being “baptized into Moses” (v. 2), the covenant mediator. Likewise, Israel partook of what the apostle calls “spiritual food” and “spiritual drink” (vv. 3–4). This language appears to be borrowed from the terminology of the

Supper.<sup>63</sup> In the original Greek, Paul sets the two clauses in parallel and repeats the first five words in each clause; this highlights his emphasis.<sup>64</sup> This eating and drinking was the privilege of all the Israelites. The food and drink refer to the manna on which Israel lived (Ex. 16; Ps. 78:23–29) and the water that flowed from the rock to save them from thirst (Ex. 17:1–7; Num. 20:2–13). Their Redeemer sustained them.

But the use of the adjective πνευματικὸν (*pneumatikón*, “spiritual”) in verses 3–4 for both the food and the drink that sustained Israel is most instructive. It appears to be a reference to the Holy Spirit. This is consistent with Paul’s regular use of the adjective in this letter, and virtually uniformly elsewhere, as a reference to the activity of the Holy Spirit (see 2:13, 15; 3:1; 9:11; 12:1; 14:1, 37; 15:44, 46).<sup>65</sup> Nothing in the context suggests another meaning.<sup>66</sup> Manna and water were miraculous and of the Holy Spirit.<sup>67</sup>

Paul is saying that Israel had an experience of the presence of the preincarnate Christ and his Spirit during the wilderness period (see

63 So *ibid.*, 419; and Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 447.

64 See Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 448. They note that Paul is almost certainly not warning the Corinthians against a superstitious trust in the sacraments. He is warning against idolatry.

65 See also Romans 1:11; Ephesians 1:3; Colossians 1:9. The only exception appears to be Ephesians 6:12.

66 See Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “Life-Giving Spirit: Probing the Center of Paul’s Pneumatology,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 4 (December 1998): 573–98; and his “The Last Adam, the Life-Giving Spirit,” in *The Forgotten Christ: Exploring the Majesty and Mystery of God Incarnate*, ed. Stephen Clark (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), 191–231.

67 Anthony C. Thiselton writes, “In its OT context, ‘spiritual’ food denotes *manna* provided by God as a miracle, while in the NT πνευματικὸς and especially in Paul denotes that which is of God’s Spirit” (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 726, *italics his*). We should probably capitalize the adjective “Spiritual” in verses 3–4. See also the reference to the instruction of the Spirit, in connection with the manna and water, in Nehemiah 9:20.

v. 9, “We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did”).<sup>68</sup> (Paul assumes here what the historic church formulated as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Each of the divine persons is eternal, and each has been involved in all of God’s acts in the creation. This is especially clear in the history of redemption.) Christ provided them with Spiritual food and drink.<sup>69</sup> He supplied their need. The water and manna functioned for them as means of grace intended to teach them their dependence on God’s word of provision: “And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3).<sup>70</sup>

Christ, by the Spirit, provided for them supernaturally. The eating and drinking were to be an exercise of faith in God’s provision. However, Paul also says that some committed idolatry and fell under judgment in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:6–10). He warns the church not to do likewise, on this covenant-historical basis (“therefore, my beloved,” v. 14), by eating and drinking at idols’ tables (vv. 14–22), among other sins.

This tells us, new-covenant believers, those “on whom the end of the ages has come” (v. 11), what it means to eat and drink at the Lord’s Table. Our Lord provides food for us. He sustains us in a wilderness

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68 Gordon D. Fee writes, “The same Christ who now supplies the Corinthians with the Spirit, and whom they are testing, by going to pagan feasts, had already experienced such ‘testing’ by Israel; and the Israelites had been overthrown in the desert. . . . It is precisely the presence of *Christ* in Israel’s story that will make all of this work as a warning to the Corinthians.” *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 94, italics his.

69 This is true however we are to understand the Rock’s “following” them (1 Cor. 10:4).

70 Deuteronomy 8:15 refers as well to the water from the rock. Nehemiah recounts the same period in Israel’s life (Neh. 9:15–21), including God’s sustaining provision of manna and water and referring to Israel’s rebellion, and says in verse 20, “You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst.”

of temptation by feeding us.<sup>71</sup> He is present with us and builds our faith by the work of his Spirit as we eat and drink. Although in verses 3–4 the reference is to the preincarnate Christ, for us who live after his incarnation, exaltation, and Pentecost, the Spirit grants us life-giving fellowship with the ascended Christ, at the Table, as he now is, *for us*. We receive him.<sup>72</sup>

Ridderbos summarizes,

This redemptive-historical analogy also casts clear light on the New Testament Supper. As Israel was in Moses once led out of Egypt and further kept alive in the wilderness by God's miraculous power, so for the church not only does its once-for-all deliverance lie in Christ's death, but its continual food and drink as well. The Lord's Supper, as communion in the body and blood of Christ delivered up in death, is also spiritual food and drink. The sacrificial gift becomes sacrificial food, the receiving of bread and wine from the hand of the Lord, in liberation and rejoicing. Therefore, this food and drink may also be called "spiritual," pneumatic, not only because it is from heaven, but because it makes us live out of Christ's self-surrender, and thus imparts his Spirit (Rom. 5:5).<sup>73</sup>

## SACRAMENTAL UNION

From what I have written above, it should be clear that I believe the Lord's Supper is more than a meal of memorial. It is real fellowship

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71 I will discuss the connection between Christ as the true manna (John 6:35–58) and the "Spirit who gives life" (vv. 62–63) below. However, I believe the subject of Jesus' discourse is not the Supper but what the Supper represents—union with him where he now is, in heaven.

72 Paul identifies the work of the ascended, glorified Christ in the church with the work of the Spirit (Rom. 8:9–10; 1 Cor. 3:17–18; Eph. 3:16–17). Cf. Gaffin's presentation in "Life-Giving Spirit," 583–84.

73 Ridderbos, *Paul*, 420.

with the resurrected Christ by means of the action of his Spirit. There is no sacrifice made, but the whole outward transaction of the meal, including eating and drinking bread and wine, are, for believers, real fellowship with the Lord. There is little doubt in my mind about that, based on Paul's questions in 1 Corinthians 10:16: "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?" These questions carry their answers within them. Paul uses the word *κοινωνία* (*koinōnía*) twice, meaning real fellowship with Christ, who was sacrificed for us (cf. v. 18, referring to the sacrifice on Israel's altar). While it certainly includes "remembrance," this is more than an act of the mind or intellect.<sup>74</sup> Eating the bread and drinking the cup are receiving anew the sustenance that comes from the sacrifice of the Lord.

Jesus commanded the disciples to eat and drink, and to do so repeatedly; Paul repeats ὅσάκις (*hosákis*), "as often as," in 1 Cor. 11:25–26.<sup>75</sup> We receive the bread and cup as receiving him. Communion with Christ comes about by the work of the Holy Spirit as we eat and drink, believing. Eating the bread thus is taking Christ into our hearts anew. Drinking the cup thus is receiving Christ's blood. This happens not physically or locally, but through the ministry of the Spirit. What we see are the signs; what we have is the reality.<sup>76</sup> The sign and the reality are described in terms that reflect each other. This

74 I will address the meaning of "remembrance" below.

75 Commenting on Luke 22:19, David G. Peterson writes, "The present tense of the Greek imperative implies the need to go on doing what Jesus commands: eating and drinking in remembrance of him" (*Encountering God Together: Leading Worship Services That Honor God, Minister to His People, and Build His Church* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013], 167).

76 See Calvin's comment on "this is my body": "This expression is a metonymy, a figure of speech commonly used in Scripture when mysteries are under discussion. . . . Though the symbol differs in essence from the thing signified (in that the latter is spiritual and heavenly, while the former is physical and visible), still, because it not only symbolizes the thing that it has been consecrated to represent as a bare and empty token, but also truly exhibits it, why may its name not rightly belong to the thing?" (*Inst.*, 2:1305 [4/17.21]).

is the “sacramental union” supported by the Scriptures.

The Reformed confessions use vigorous language to describe the presence of Christ in the Supper. For example, the Belgic Confession, article 35, says,

Though Christ always sits at the right hand of his Father in the heavens, yet does he not therefore cease to make us partakers of himself by faith. This feast is a spiritual table, at which Christ communicates himself with all his benefits to us, and gives us there to enjoy both himself and the merits of his sufferings and death: nourishing, strengthening, and comforting our poor comfortless souls, by the eating of his flesh, quickening and refreshing them by their drinking of his blood.

However, the confessions qualify carefully, so as to deny a physical presence or one that would identify Christ’s actual body and blood with the elements.<sup>77</sup> “It is receiving from his hands and eating and drinking of the fruits of his cross until he comes to drink the new wine with his followers in his Father’s Kingdom.”<sup>78</sup> This has been the Reformed understanding of Holy Scripture, and I follow it here. “All, like hungry men, should flock to such a bounteous repast.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> See Heidelberg Catechism, question and answer 78, 80; Westminster Confession of Faith, 29.6–7. Cf. Cornelis P. Venema, “The Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper in the Reformed Confessions” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 12 (2001): 135–99.

<sup>78</sup> Ridderbos, *Coming of the Kingdom*, 439.

<sup>79</sup> Calvin, *Inst.*, 2:1424 (4/17.46).



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