

“DO THIS AS MY MEMORIAL:”
RUMINATIONS ON THE RITUAL OF THE LORD’S SUPPER¹

“On the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread and gave thanks.” Each week at the Table these words are heard at the ritual of the Lord’s Supper. From the time Jesus instituted the meal to the present, there has been a great amount of discussion concerning the meaning of the Lord’s Supper. How is Jesus present in the meal? What does God actually *do* in the meal? Questions such as these and more have not only been pondered by the Church for ages, but the answers to these questions have ironically divided the body of Christ into different groups.

Most of these discussion orbit around philosophical issues and tend toward abstractions; that is, things that can’t be seen but are mainly left in the world of ideas. People will start with certain words, phrases, or sentences within these institution passages such as “This is my body” and then begin to extrapolate all that this means about the bread. These abstract ideas trickle down to certain practices that affect the ritual of the Lord’s Supper itself.

If we start at places like this, we can come up with all sorts of ways to do the Lord’s Supper based upon the conclusions that we draw from our philosophical musings. But when we read the passages in which Jesus instituted the Supper, we discover that Jesus primarily gave us something to *do*. He gave us a ritual, a set of actions to be performed. Jesus surely means for us to reflect upon these actions and seek better understanding of what we are doing. However, we start with the ritual as he instituted it and work from there. We are supposed to “do this” first and then reflect upon it, not the other way around. I suggest that when we do this, we get a fuller and better picture of what the Lord’s Supper is and what God does in it. Starting with the ritual action does not mean that there is not some deep theology that needs to be explored. There is. It simply means that we start with the actions and move toward the substance of those actions instead of trying to excise substance divorced from the ritual actions of Jesus.

What you are reading is not comprehensive by any stretch of the imagination. Inasmuch as Jesus is the fulfillment of all of the Scriptures and now represents himself in this meal, so this meal is the fulfillment of all of the Scriptures and would take more than one lifetime to unpack. These are some ruminations on certain truths that arise out of the ritual of the Lord’s Supper. Through these meditations on the Supper we should understand that, when Jesus institutes the new covenant meal, the ritual acts he performs are significant to our practice and to the meaning of the meal itself.

Ritual As Ritual

Ritual

We begin by looking at the Lord’s Supper as a *ritual*. Ritual. When we hear that word, we tend to become a little nervous and possibly even fearful. We may tend to think of dark churches mumbling things and going through mindless rote while the people come in to go through the motions and then go out leaving all the religious stuff in the church building.

Our caricatures are not totally unfounded. We see these types of things in our experience and

¹ This was originally a series of sermons taught during 2010.

tend to lay the blame at the doorstep of ritual. I know that this was the reaction that many of us had where I grew up. I grew up in South Louisiana, a region saturated with Roman Catholicism. I saw people who went to Mass, went through all the rituals, and then live all kinds of wild lives. Everything was all right as long as they went to confession, did their penance, and attended Mass semi-regularly. While the church does indeed have many problems that might contribute to this idea, I and others around me tended to lay the blame more on the fact that they were “ritualistic.”

“Ritualistic” meant “heartless” by definition. We had “heart” because we were spontaneous; because we said we wanted God to show up and do something that wasn’t in the bulletin. (Of course, there were as many moral problems in these “spontaneous” churches as there were in these ritualistic churches, but that’s beside the point, isn’t it?) Because ritual was associated with heartlessness in our minds, we had a visceral reaction to ritual so that we wanted to change things up all the time to make sure we didn’t get into a rut. We wanted to be as far away from mindless, heartless religious activity as possible.

There is something good in that reaction. We should never want to be mindless or heartless in our worship. God is not and has never been for that type of ritualism either. Some of his strongest words were reserved for people who engaged in ritual without living out what they were saying in the ritual. Hear what YHWH says through the prophet Isaiah in his opening chapter:

Hear the word of YHWH, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says YHWH; I have had enough of ascension offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations-- I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. (Isa 1.10-17)

These rituals God detests here are the very rituals he prescribes in places like Leviticus, yet now he detests them and wants them to do them no longer. Why is that? Is it because they weren’t “feeling it” when they came to worship? No; at least not primarily. It has to do with the way they were acting outside of the context of these rituals. They were not treating their neighbors in ways that were consistent with their worship. They were not seeking justice, correcting oppression, giving justice to the fatherless and widow.

“Heartless worship,” at least biblically speaking, has more to do with not fulfilling your covenant responsibilities than it does with how you might feel in worship. Because God wants us to love him with all that we are as humans, emotions need to be involved in worship. But emotions are not the determining factor of whether or not worship rituals are faithful. You can *feel it* and be totally off base just as much as someone can have all the right rituals and still be totally off base.

Emotions ebb and flow depending on a number of circumstances. True worship involves *rock-*

solid commitment or loyalty to doing what is right no matter the circumstances. Rituals, when understood in their proper biblical context, aid that instead of detract from it. They are consistent reminders of who we are and what we are supposed to be.

Rituals are unavoidable. All people have rituals both in worship and in other areas of life. The question is *not*, “Will we have rituals?” but “What rituals will we have and why?”

God as a God of rituals

We will have rituals because God is a God of rituals and we are made in his image. From the beginning of the record of history given to us in Genesis we see that God is a God of rituals. Creation itself is created through ritual action and reflects ritual at every point. God speaks a certain way and things appear. Ten times in the opening chapter of Genesis we hear “and God said.” There is a ritual action. Then we see the creation itself. The days of creation have the rhythm, the ritual, of evening and morning. Each day is a ritual, moving from darkness to light. This ritual is engulfed in and a part of a larger ritual of a week. After seven cycles of evening and morning there is a week. Weeks make up yet another larger ritual cycle of months. Months are part of a ritual of seasons, and seasons are part of a ritual of a year.

God is a God of rituals. It is intrinsic to his creation. There are variations within these rituals. Some days are different than others in that, for example, some days it rains and some days there is sunshine. Even though there are variations within these rituals in creation, the foundational rituals of days, weeks, months, years provide this underlying stability to it all.

Time is not only ritualistic in the fact that days, weeks, months, and years cycle through the same patterns, but also what we call history—the events focused upon the activities of God and men—goes through rituals. We might call these patterns, but it is the same principle. We see these patterns throughout Scripture, which is a record of history. There are variations on the ritual because nothing is ever exactly the same. But the fundamental rituals of history help us to see, for example, how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Passover and Exodus as he is presented in Scripture. The patterns of history, the rituals, inform us as to who Jesus is and what he came to do.

God being a God of rituals is also reflected in the worship he prescribes. Though men may abuse the rituals, it does not negate the fact that God prescribed certain rituals to be performed as acts of worship before him. There were daily rituals (morning and evening sacrifice). There were weekly rituals (holy convocations on the Sabbath). There were monthly rituals (new moon). There were yearly cycles (the major feasts of Israel).

Large cycles of rituals all the way down to the details of how particular sacrifices were to be offered were all prescribed by God. God never encouraged his people to mindless, heartless worship. That would be rebellion against the substance of the ritual. God is saying something about who they are and what they are to be doing *in the ritual*. If they did not conform their lives to this, they were living in rebellion.

The very act of ritual has within it the call to reflect upon its meaning. We are to think about the actions—the ritualistic patterns—that God prescribes so that we may understand who we are and what God has created and redeemed us to be.

Rituals Shape Our Lives

Rituals shape our lives. Think about it from the larger picture of creation. The ritualistic pattern of weekdays shapes the way we live. Night, day, and seasons of the year inform us as to what we are to be doing. It makes a difference if it is Monday or Saturday, whether it is winter or summer. What day it is will inform as to whether or not is a day to work or rest. Depending on what time of the year it is, we are either planting, harvesting, or bundling up.

Rituals penetrate below mere surface activities. They shape who we are and the way we think. They shape what we love and what we reject. We are formed by certain rituals or the lack thereof.

Think about how the rearing of children. There are certain rituals in the home that determine who you are and how you will relate to others. You want to teach your children to be thankful. The way you do that when they are young is to teach them to say, "Thank you" when someone has been gracious to them in some way. "Thank you" must become a ritual response for you or for your children. They are to respond that way automatically. You remind them of it when they don't. You want something ingrained in them. It is ingrained when they go through the ritual of saying, "Thank you" in response to another person's kindness.

That ritual of responding to the gracious actions of others shapes the way you and your children relate to other people. The opposite can also be true. If you don't teach your children to say, "Thank you" you are developing them in another way with this no-response ritual.

This is also true about pausing before meals to give thanks to God. This ritual action plays a significant role in shaping you and your children into thankful people. (Yes, there is much more to developing thankful children, but this is one aspect of it.)

As you reflect later upon the ritual of giving thanks, you understand that you are not self-sufficient. You must be humble, recognizing the goodness and gifts of others. The ritual steers you away from being arrogant and acting as if everything you receive is owed you. Refusal to go through the ritual you learned rebukes you. You are not acknowledging the goodness of others extended to you. Ritual actions shape us.

This is also true in larger contexts. Rituals around holidays mold our relationships. Holiday rituals bring us together for a common purpose, telling us who we are and, thus, shape us into certain types of people. We come together with others for this purpose, and the ritual tells us who we are, not just as individuals, but as a community at whatever level (that is, whether biological family, organization, and even the church). These rituals forge relationships. They do so by pointing us to a shared past, celebrating them together in the present, and moving us into changed relationships for the future. Our relationships are changed as we spend time together in these rituals.

This is why rituals within the home concerning the Scriptures and prayer are so important. How do you want the lives of you and your children shaped? One way you can tell that is by asking the question, "What are your rituals?" Is your life shaped by prayer? Do you begin the day and end the day in prayer (much like the morning and evening sacrifices)? Your rituals reveal what you love and they shape what you love.

Do you fathers and mothers lead your children in prayer and teach them to develop rituals for

themselves as well as developing rituals for your family? Your rituals develop the culture of your home. Lack of focused, purposeful ritual will tend toward lack of discipline in the home. The home will not be well-ordered. The lack of ritual tends toward a home culture that is unstable and anxious.

Your rituals shape you. How are you being shaped? Changing rituals and establishing good rituals is not always an easy task. Sometimes it is just hard work. But you always work hard for the things you really love.

The fact that rituals shape us is also the reason why the rituals of our worship as a community are so important. Let me quickly add: this is not just because rituals as some impersonal force shape us, but because God prescribes certain rituals that shape us in a particular way. God wants us shaped in a way that reflects his character. He wants the pattern of our lives to match the pattern of his life. So, he prescribes patterns, rituals, for us that will shape us into those sorts of people.

One of those rituals—indeed, the Ritual of rituals—is the Lord’s Supper. This ritual is not on the same level as teaching your child to say, “Thank you.” Teaching your child to say “thank you” as a ritual response to goodness received from others flows from *the* Ritual. The Lord’s Supper is a ritual directly instituted by Jesus Christ. It has the authority of heaven behind it and is, therefore, unique.

This is also why the ritual-as-a-ritual needs to be reflected upon. The way we *do* the Lord’s Supper is important to the way we are being shaped as a people. It is not just what we *think* about it divorced from our actions that matter. We can’t extract the bread or the wine from the context of the ritual *action* and develop all sorts of thoughts about it. Jesus situated both within this ritual context. So, bread and wine at your home table is not the same as it is in this context. The ritual context gives particular meaning to the elements used. These ritual actions with these elements shape us as a people. This is why it is incumbent upon us to reflect upon these actions more carefully.

The Ritual as Two Separate Acts

The Lord’s Supper is a ritual, and rituals are important for shaping as individuals and a community. In the Lord’s Supper Jesus gave us certain actions to perform, patterns for us to follow.

Generally, we think of the meal as one. It is one meal involving bread and wine. But there are two very distinct parts of the meal: the rite with the bread and the rite with the wine. Jesus performs these rites with similar actions, but in doing so, he makes them distinct from one another: Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks or blesses it, breaks it, gives it to his disciples, commands them, identifies himself with it, and they eat. The wine follows a similar pattern: Jesus takes the cup, gives thanks, gives it to them, commands them, identifies himself with the cup’s contents, they drink.

This is pretty simple. These are straightforward actions. But somehow the church has done all sorts of things to make something so simple very complicated. For instance, it is clear that Jesus keeps the bread and the wine separate. He doesn’t give them bread and wine at the same time. There are two separate prayers at the distribution of the bread and the distribution of the wine. These are two distinct rites within the one meal. Yet churches give both at the same time and

pray one prayer over both. Much of this comes from thinking about the elements first and then making our actions conform to what we think about the elements.

These prayers are prayers of praise and thanksgiving to God for his goodness. One reason the church calls the Supper the “Eucharist” is because this practically transliterated from the Greek word “Thanksgiving.” This is a thanksgiving meal. The prayers are not prayers of consecration which *make* these the body and blood of Christ. But when you take the elements and certain phrases out of the ritual action, that is what you come up with. From this develops practices such as adoration of the elements.

Jesus gives us some simple actions. Sometimes I wonder if the simplicity of the actions are not the very things that are scandalous to us. It doesn’t look religious enough, so we need to add many things to it. The simple giving of thanks is what Jesus does before the bread and the wine. Giving thanks as a ritual action shapes us into thankful people.

One characteristic of the world that is in Adam is that they are unthankful. This is what Paul says in Romans 1.21. People in Adam don’t give thanks. In the ritual of giving thanks before we eat the bread and drink the wine informs us that we are to be thankful people. If we are not living lives of gratitude, we are rebuked.

Jesus keeps the bread and the wine separate. They are two parts of the one meal. He doesn’t take the bread and dip it in the wine and then give it to them. (This is called intinction.) Why does he not do this? There are many reasons, some of which we will explore later. One reason is that this is a sacrificial meal. The bread is the body and the wine is the blood of Christ. This is a meal memorializing the sacrifice of Christ. In a sacrifice the body is drained of blood. Body and blood are separated in a sacrifice. There is an indication of a finished sacrifice. Putting bread and wine together ritualistically communicates the wrong substance and leads us to some wrong notions of Jesus’ work. We might start thinking things like Jesus is being perpetually sacrificed every time we have the Supper. (This is not the only reason for believing this, but it is a contributing factor). Whether people do it because it is more convenient or because it has a cool factor (that is, all the hip churches are doing this now), it is wrong. We haven’t taken into consideration the power of rituals and the fact that what we do in worship will eventually form our beliefs. Jesus doesn’t mix the bread and wine. Instead, he takes the bread first and then takes the wine afterward.

The elements are not mixed with one another, and they are given in a certain order. There is significance in this as well. There is a movement from one substance to the other: from bread to wine. I will explain more of this later, but one significant factor is that it is a movement from a priestly stage (bread) to a kingly stage (wine). The people of God have matured in Christ. There is an historical movement that is being communicated in the ritual. If you turn those two around, the ritual will shape the way we see things. And it will be backwards.

Not taking Jesus’ ritual actions to heart but deriving actions from the way we think about the elements extracted from context has also led to people making this a penitential meal instead of a meal of rest and celebration. Jesus and his disciples are in a position of rest when they take this meal. They are reclined at the table. They are not kneeling. They do not come up to Jesus at a rail to receive the bread and wine directly from his hand. Again, some of this might have developed from removing the elements from the ritual context and meditating on them outside of this context. Maybe people focused on the phrase “for the forgiveness of sins” and developed the practice that people ought to be in a penitential posture when receiving the meal. It might also be

more convenient to have everyone come up front and give them bread and wine together.

However it evolved in the church, Jesus' actions show us that it has not always been this way. The people of God take the bread separately from the wine, each rite having its own prayer, and they eat and drink in a position of rest. God wanted us shaped in a certain way. This ritual order is consistent through the Gospels as well as Paul's account to the Corinthians. There must be something to it. We need to conform as closely as possible because what we do in this ritual *will* shape what we believe and how we live.

Rituals are important. Again, it is not whether or not you will have rituals. You will have rituals. But what rituals will you have and why? These rituals will shape you in your heart. This involves everything from daily routines to how we form cultures in our homes to how we form the culture of a particular church. Jesus gave us a straightforward ritual which informs us that we have two rites in this one meal. We are to take the bread first, give thanks for it, give it out to one another in a position of rest, and eat it. *After this*, we are to take the cup of wine, give thanks for it, give it out, and drink it in a position of rest. As we do these things and consciously reflect on the actions Jesus gave us, we will be shaped by the ritual into the people God wants us to be in Christ.

The Ritual as a Community Meal

Not with blood family

It is obvious from the context of our passage that neither Jesus nor the disciples are eating with their families. According to the instructions given to the disciples to prepare the Passover, Jesus will eat this Passover with his disciples (Matt 26.18). Jesus establishes the New Covenant meal within a context that doesn't put a primary emphasis on the biological family. This is not unusual even for the celebration of the Passover. We may tend to think of the Passover as a meal with families, but it was not even originally exclusively focused on individual families. The original Passover was in homes. Families did celebrate it. But one of the prescriptions for the Passover lets us know that it was not to be family centered.

In Exodus 12 where the Passover ritual is prescribed, the flock member (that is, a lamb or kid) that must be eaten may be too large for one household. If that was the case, then they were to go to their neighbor and have them join in. They weren't to go and gather their nearest kin to the meal. So, even in the original Passover, the meal emphasized each person and household were members of a larger family. After the original Passover the sacrifice of Passover became centralized in the Tabernacle and, eventually, the Temple. It may have been eaten in homes, but there was more of an emphasis on Israel as the family.

Jesus and the twelve apostles are with one another. This is not extraordinary. But Jesus makes it clear that this community being formed around him supersedes the biological family. The biological family is important as it has always been. But the biological family is not primary ... something that has always been true.

This is clear through Jesus' teaching. Now it being made clear in the celebration of this meal. This meal is not to be celebrated in such a way that gives precedence to the biological family.

This could be done a number of ways. One way I have observed this being done is having husbands/fathers serve their families. This communicates that the husband/father is the one who

holds the keys to the kingdom. But the husband/father has no special authority at this Table. He cannot admit or excommunicate his children or his wife. Each member of the family is as much a full member of the church as the husband/father. Having the husbands/fathers ritualistically taking the bread and wine to their families communicates that individual families take priority over the larger church. But when we gather as the church each baptized person is an equal member of the family and the husband/father is Christ's representative in the liturgy: the pastor.

This does not mean that parents cannot help children when we eat and drink. They may. But they do so as more mature members helping more immature, weaker members of the body. I'm speaking about making husbands/fathers part of the ritual action. This is not proper. The ritual communicates that *the* community is one made up of those who are united to Christ. Baptism, not family blood, admits you to the Table. Christ's representatives in the church admit and bar people from the Table.

Not in an individual context

While the meal is not served in the context of the biological family as being primary, there is still a family context. The meal is eaten as the family of God. The meal is not an individual rite that is a matter of private devotion. The Lord's Supper is a community meal. As a ritual meal instituted by Christ, this meal forms us into the body of Christ.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10.17: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, *for* we all partake of the one bread" (emphasis mine). The body of Christ is one body that is signified to us in the bread that we eat. He says that we who are of that one body are such *because we all partake of the one bread/loaf*. That is, eating this bread together makes us the body of Christ. We are formed into the body of Christ when we eat together.

Questions surrounding the efficacy of the Lord's Supper tend to focus on the individual and what happens within him. The initial question is normally something like, "What happens to me when I eat the bread and drink the wine?" The individual does change. But the way we have tended to think of that in terms of personal piety in this day and culture seems to miss the mark about just how an individual changes.

The Supper creates a context of the way things ought to be for us as individuals and a community. If you want to see God's intention for man, you will never understand that better than when you are gathered around this Table each Lord's Service. It is here that you learn what it means to be an individual. You learn in the broadest since that it is not good for man to be alone. The Supper puts the individual within the context of a community, a community with whom he must relate. An individual's personal piety can never be separated from his life in the community. You discover who you are and your purpose in life *as an individual* in the context of this community of God's people. You are who you are as an individual Christian only in relationship with the rest of the body of Christ. Everything he does as an individual—for example, personal prayer time—is always within the context of his relationships in the community. Your life is to be lived for others. This is something that is most explicit in this meal, beginning with our Lord himself.

Jesus was who he was *for the sake of his people*. Even his name, Jesus/Joshua, spoke of who he was as an individual in relationship to his people. Remember, he is named this for he—the individual—will save his people from their sins. His identity as an individual cannot be separated from the community.

In this meal our individual identities and personal holiness are given their proper context. Personal zeal, heart devotion, *et al.* are things that should be cultivated. But they are not ends in themselves. They are means to serve others. Being zealous and in deeply in love with Jesus are necessary characteristics of individuals within the body and are actually cultivated through each one of us participating in the Supper. But the Supper as a meal celebrated in community and for the purpose of forming community keeps all of our individual aspirations within their proper context.

This is not the community at the expense of the individual. Rather this is the individual who, as the image of God, properly understands that he exists within community. The apostle John says, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar..." (1Jn 4.20). John is saying that one's personal love for God is measured by how he loves his brother. He is not destroying or discounting the individual as an individual and his personal devotion to God. He is saying that personal devotion to God cannot be understood outside of the context of love for one's brother. So, if you have three hours of personal quiet time and then go out treat your brother like dirt, you don't love God *as an individual*. It doesn't matter what kind of experience you had in your quiet time. It doesn't mean a thing because your personal holiness cannot be separated from your relationships with others. The Supper puts us in the proper context of individuals relating to the larger community. In order for an individual to have life *as an individual* he must lose his life for the sake of others.

When we don't focus on the meal as a community meal but what it does in me no matter how I relate to others, we can slip into the practice of carrying around wafers to individual people as if they can have the same benefits apart from the worshipping community as they do with the worshipping community. When Paul instructs the Corinthians in 1Corinthians 11, he is clear that this meal occurs "when they come together in the church." The meal is to be eaten in a community context. Individuals participate and receive benefit as they are a part of and participate in the community. We can't have that by individually taking bread and wine in private. The individual's life is found in and bound to the community of the body of Christ.

The ritual of eating and drinking

We eat and drink as a community. When Jesus institutes the ritual, he does so in way that tells us how we are to eat bread and drink wine. After Jesus breaks the bread, he gives it to his disciples and tells each of them to "take, eat." The same commands are also given with the cup: "take, drink."

We know with the cup that they only had one cup. So, each man drank a small amount from the same cup. But they could not all drink it at one time. Each person had to drink after the other person.

The bread rite is the same. Jesus gives the bread to the disciples and tells them to "take, eat." This means that when each one takes his piece of bread, he eats it as he receives it. They do not wait and eat simultaneously. They eat as they receive the bread.

I have made the mistake in the past of believing that eating the bread simultaneously is what shows our unity in the body. But in the words of Porgy and Bess, "it ain't necessarily so." The unity comes from the fact that we are eating bread at the same Table from the same loaf, not that

we are eating it simultaneously. Jesus wants us shaped in a particular way, and that way comes through us eating when we receive the bread.

There is an important lesson to learn from the ritual here. *Each disciple does not receive the bread or the wine directly from the hand of Jesus but from one another.* The disciple takes it and eats or drinks it as he receives it from the hands of the disciple next to him. From this we learn how Jesus works in us as individuals in the church. Jesus gives us his gifts through others. Jesus does not always give us things directly, rather he instructs us, encourages us, rebukes us, and such the like through other individuals in the body. As we take and eat and drink from one another in the body, we are receiving the gifts of Jesus through other people.

As a protection, this helps guard us from any kind of belief that the minister is closer to God than anyone else. You don't need to receive it directly from the minister's hand as in some churches. Instead, you may receive the bread and wine from a little child or an aged person. You may receive it from your wife or someone else's husband. In this way the ritual exhibits the ministry that we have to one another. We do not have to wait to eat together as if I must consecrate your eating because receiving it from the person next to you is not good enough. The person next to you is Christ to you and you to him in a particular way.

Leaders First

There is yet another aspect of this meal as a community ritual that is quite obvious, but it is something that we rarely see practiced in evangelical churches. While each one of us takes the bread and cup from the other, there is an order in which this occurs. The setting of the order of the ritual is quite clear: the leadership takes the bread and wine first. After this it is given to all of the others.

First, we see Jesus observing this order in its full significance; indeed, giving substance to the meal itself. His body is broken and he drinks from the cup first and foremost. The cup, as Jesus explains, is something that Jesus wants to avoid. But he does not. Jesus goes first. Then he gives to his apostles. The apostles are the foundation and first of this new community being formed in Christ. As such, it is appropriate for them to go first. Only after the apostles eat and drink is the meal given to the rest of the church.

We consider the leadership going first to be rather impolite. There are reasons that we think this. In other contexts it might indeed be proper for the leadership to go last. In other contexts it might be an expression of deference to others and serving them. In this case, the leaders going first is a matter of service. The ritual as well as what is said about the meal speak to the nature of the meal itself and why it is not only appropriate but incumbent that the leaders go first.

This meal is a death meal. The body is separated from the blood. The body is broken. The cup is blood that is poured out. Seeing that life is in the blood (Lev 17.11, 14), blood being poured out means that life is being poured out; a person is being emptied of life. Because this is a meal that promises death to the eaters, it is appropriate that the leaders go first. The shepherd or pastor (same word in Greek) lays down his life for the sheep. The pastor should eat first because it is his responsibility to eat and drink death for the sake of the congregation. The elders and deacons should follow. We have the primary responsibilities as servants of the church to die for the congregation. We are not to be like Adam who pushed the bride out there and let her eat first to see if she would die like God said. We are to be like the last Adam, Christ, who eats and drinks

first to take the promised death for the bride. But Jesus does give it to each of his apostles and the apostle eventually give it to the rest of the church. Each one of us has the responsibility to die for his neighbor.

This means that when the bread is passed, each person should take it and eat it as it is passed. As you do this you are eating death to yourself for other members of the body of Christ. This is related to our responsibility to bear one another's burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ as Paul says in Galatians 6. The wine is the same. We each take and drink as it is passed. In this we eat and drink death for our neighbor, our brother, our sister.

We eat and drink death to ourselves for the sake of others and thus follow the pattern of Christ's life and fulfill the meaning of the ritual meal. Jesus gave himself for the sake of his people. We are to do the same. In this context, to be a servant to all means that we die first. Each one of us is putting ourselves in God's hands to be put to death in the way that he sees fit for others.

One aspect of eating by faith in this meal is just this fact: we are committing ourselves completely to God for him to do what he will with us for the sake of his people. We are saying, "Father, I am committing myself to die for these people around me. I don't know what that will look like. I am committing myself to your hands for this purpose."

This is not a meal in which we think about how the person to whom we hand the bread and cup is or is not meeting my needs. I am not thinking about what everyone else ought to be doing for me. I am saying in this meal that my life is being offered up to God for the sake of these others. This is a serious meal. It is a risky meal. That is why the leaders should take it first. They take the greatest risk. But each of us has this same responsibility in some form or fashion.

Knowing this, you can be assured that God will take you up on it. He will put you to death for the sake of others. Sometimes it is not pleasant. Jesus didn't think it was pleasant. But there is the promise of resurrection on the other side, something we shall concentrate upon at another time.

The Ritual as a Command

One thing abundantly clear in the ritual is the commands of Jesus. Jesus gave commands at the meal: "Take, eat" and "Take, drink." These were not suggestions for those who seated around that table. For those who have been called to the Feast, this is not an optional meal. To refuse the bread and the wine is to declare that you have no communion with Christ and his body.

To disobey him in this regard is to disobey your Lord. Somehow, we have come to believe that we ought to give the people of God options when we come to the Table. For whatever reason, if you don't feel worthy enough to take this meal, then maybe you ought not. Some of this stems from the exhortations and admonitions of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. We read Paul saying a man ought to examine himself before he comes to the Table. Then we read Paul talking about people dying because they eat and drink in an unworthy manner. We conclude: If you don't feel like you can eat in a worthy manner, then you ought to abstain from eating. But the fact is, Paul says nothing of the sort. Nowhere do we hear Paul saying, "Abstain from the Table until you feel like you can eat in a worthy manner."

The church gathered had to eat from the Table if they belonged to Christ. Remember, this is what

made them the body of Christ. Paul's point is this: "Get yourself right and come and eat the bread and drink the wine in a worthy manner. If you don't want to fall under judgment for eating in an unworthy manner, then repent." Paul is assuming that they must eat. It would have been unthinkable for someone in Israel to say, "I'm an Israelite, but I don't participate in the Passover." Sheer lunacy! Paul's exhortation is more like this: "Since you must obey your Lord and eat at this Table, then you better get yourself straightened up so that when you do eat and drink you don't eat and drink judgment to yourself."

Allowing people to absent themselves from the Table, first, gives them authority over the Table, an authority they do not have. People are admitted and excommunicated by authorities outside of themselves. This is a good thing. Left to ourselves we would tend toward one of two directions: we would never think ourselves fit to come to the Table or we wouldn't heed the warnings of living inconsistently with the Table. We need authorities outside of ourselves to keep us from going in either direction. Jesus tells his disciples ... even with Judas present ... take and eat. This was a command. To refuse is to disobey the Lord of the Table.

Another effect of not understanding this as a command but encouraging people to absent themselves from the Table under their own authority is that timely repentance is not encouraged. People will think (because this is how we are): "I will avoid taking the bread and wine because I am just not ready to deal with this issue." No, you must eat this meal because Jesus said so. Because you must eat of this meal, you must also deal with your sin in a timely fashion." You can't put off eating and drinking with the body of Christ until you are good and ready to deal with your sin. Deal with your sin. The fact that you cannot avoid the Supper without being disobedient means that you *must* deal with it.

That is also a gracious aspect of the meal and the command to eat and drink. Sin destroys your life. If Jesus gave you the option, he would be giving you the option to stay in sin that would be detrimental for you. Why would he do something like that? Do we think that he gives us the option to abstain from taking because we are not willing to deal with that which is destroying us? He commands us to eat. Knowing that you are coming here on Sunday to eat this meal means that you need to deal with situations before you get here.

If you have relationship problems, rifts that you have not attempted to resolve, you had better take care of it before you get here. If the problem is your own feelings toward other people that have not yet manifested themselves so that there is a rift between you and that person, deal with that in your own heart. If you don't deal with these things, just know that when you come to eat this meal, God's gonna spank you good. He will deal with it. And the only way to avoid it is to turn your back on him and refuse to obey him and come and do what you are supposed to do: eat this meal. You hold on to your unforgiveness and bitterness and God's will tear you up.

And you can't run from it either. Even if you leave one church and go to another church, it is the same Table from which we eat. You can't run. You can't hide. Again, the only other option is to turn your back on Jesus. So, deal with the sin and then come and eat just like Jesus commanded. It's good for you. As you do this it will be for your life. That sin will destroy you. It is Jesus' grace in the command that makes us deal with it.

Ritual as Bread and Wine

Eating, drinking, living

God made man a hungry being. Just after creating man, blessing him and commissioning him to be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth, God set before man a feast. He set before him every tree of the Garden. God told him that every herb and tree that yields seed would be food for the man and the woman. Man comes freshly created as a hungry being and God provides him with food. God gives him food not merely for the mechanics of sustaining life—though if he does not eat he will die—but also to teach him.

How can dead food sustain life? Man must think about the world in which God placed him and of which he is a part and learn that his life does not come from the creation itself but it comes from God. But unlike God's initial act of creation, God does not sustain life apart from the rest of creation. That is, God is not communicating life to the man directly but through the creation. God gave us very physical, this world, material food to communicate *his* life to us. Life is not found in the food itself but in the God who gives us the food and brings it to life in our bodies. All of life is, in this way, sacramental. There is no food that does not need the blessing of God to cause us to live.

God causes us to reflect on this reality by commanding certain food be eaten and drunk before him as covenant rituals. Through this food God is communicating his life to us. Life is not in the food *as* food because the food in and of itself is dead. Creation in and of itself cannot give or sustain life. Life is in the food inasmuch as it is blessed by God. Creation does not give life, but God works through creation to give us his life.

As we come to the ritual meal that Jesus gave us, we are introduced to two very physical elements. These elements are this-world stuff. This is important to reflect upon as we consider the meaning of the Supper itself. Jesus does not introduce substances from outside of creation to institute and celebrate this meal. The bread and wine are not “other worldly,” things unknown to our daily living in our day-in and day-out existence. This is bread and wine.

Giving us bread and wine as representatives of his own body and blood is quite appropriate to who Jesus himself is and what he came to do. God the Son exists in eternity. But a particular point in time in creation's history, God the Son takes on the substance of this world when he becomes a man. The Son-Word becomes flesh. Hebrews makes it clear that he was not made like the angels, but rather he became one of us: man. The eternal Son takes the creation into himself. He becomes one with the creation. Therefore, it is appropriate and proper that this ritual meal have these worldly/creation elements as its substance.

The relationship does not stop there. The elements of the meal reflecting the incarnation of the Son is an important aspect of the meaning of the meal. But we must also remember that the Son did not simply become a part of the creation in his incarnation as an end in itself. The incarnation was a mission.

In the beginning, when God created the first man and woman, he gave them a mission: be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth, taking dominion over the entirety of creation. God created a world as a project for man. It was not a finished work in one respect. Man had the responsibility to take up the creation that God gave to him and continue God's creative activity as his image-bearer transforming the creation into new and more glorious expressions of God's glory.

When we hear the word “dominion” we might hear negative connotations such as “tyranny.” But

this is not the kind of dominion God instructed the man and the woman to take. Their dominion was to reflect the dominion of the self-giving God who takes things up into himself and transforms them making them more glorious. So, the mission of man was to take up the world and transform it from glory to glory in the same way.

Jesus' mission as the last Adam is reflected in the bread and the wine used in this ritual for both are the products of dominion. The grain is planted, cultivated, harvested, crushed, combined with other elements, and put through the fire (i.e., baked). Man has taken a seed and transformed it. This is a work of dominion.

The wine is the same. The vine is planted, cultivated, harvested, crushed, combined with other elements, and allowed to age, being carefully monitored. Man has taken a grape and transformed it into something more glorious than it was in the beginning. This is a work of dominion.

Jesus' work as the incarnate Son of God is to take up the creation and fulfill the mission given to Adam from the beginning. He is to transform the world. The bread and the wine tell us not only that the mission of the last Adam—Christ and his bride, the church—is to take dominion over the world, transforming it from glory to glory, but we also learn through the use of these elements just how that mission is accomplished.

As mentioned earlier, this mission is not accomplished through heavy-handed tyranny. Our dominion is taken through handing our lives over to God in self-sacrifice. We give ourselves over to be consumed by others. In this way we transform the creation.

Think about it terms of food. As referenced earlier, food is dead (at least when we eat it). Whether we are talking about grain that has been harvested, fruit plucked from the vine or tree, or animals that have been killed, food is dead. But creation embodied in food is resurrected when we consume it. In us the creation embodied in food is brought to life after it is consumed. It becomes life in our bodies through the activity and power of God in us. The whole world lives in a pattern of death and resurrection. When one thing dies and is consumed by another for food, it brings life.

So it is in this meal. First, Jesus makes himself food for us in his death. We consume him, body and blood, at the Table. Jesus said that if a man would not eat his flesh and drink his blood, he would have no life in him (Jn 6.53). In order for us to have life, we must consume the death of another. This is ultimately realized in Jesus and in this meal that he gave us. If we don't consume him, then we die.

But the other side of that is that the one who is consumed also "comes to life" in the other person. *There is a resurrection for the one that is consumed as well as the one who consumes.* The only way to have life is through death. Death always comes first. Death brings about life in God's creative and providential workings. We live because we consume Jesus in this meal. Jesus' life is then "resurrected" as it were in us as a church. (More on this below.)

This is not only true in terms of feasting on the man Jesus, but it is also true in the fact that this meal is the consuming of one another. When Paul instructs the Corinthian church about their practices at the Lord's Supper, he speaks to them about what it means to be the body of Christ. We are the body of Christ he says, because we all partake of this one bread/loaf. Christ's church is his body. When we eat this bread we are consuming one another. We eat one another.

This is the only way we have life: we give it to others. This is a death meal. It is a ritual in which Jesus is shaping his church to live as he lived, which means the giving up of ourselves for the sake of others. Each one of us is food for others. We are brought to life as we give ourselves to be consumed by others. Only as we give ourselves to one another in this way will we *live* as the body of Christ. It is only through death that we receive life from God.

The way Jesus comes to live and have dominion over the world is through giving himself to be consumed. Because of this, God the Father highly exalts him and gives him a name which is above every other name (Phil 2.6-11). Our lives are the same. The way we come to the place of dominion in the world is to give ourselves to be consumed by others. Through death we find life.

Eating Bread, Drinking Wine, & Faith

Bread and wine used in the meal reflect the fact, the nature, and the goal of the Son's incarnation. Using the elements that he told us to use, therefore, is important in the ritual. There is something in the use of the bread and wine that transforms us into the people God would have us be. When we come to the ritual of the Lord's Supper, we eat bread and drink wine in faith. Faith, of course, is the proper response to every good gift that God gives us in the Supper. I want to isolate one aspect of what God gives us and reflect upon what it means to eat and drink in faith.

In one respect, eating and drinking in faith means using *bread and wine*. This seems simple enough, but somehow we in the church have gotten confused about just what we are instructed to use. We have substituted other elements for whatever reason and have, in some way, distorted the meaning of the ritual itself.

Bread is bread. Bread is not crackers or wafers that melt in your mouth and not in your hands. We don't eat symbolic bread. We eat bread. Real bread. If you are asked to pick up bread on your way home and you come home with a box of crackers, what do you think the response will be? "I said we needed bread, not crackers."

We know the difference between the two. Bread is not those hard, little squares that sound like marbles hitting a plate or round flat discs that have no resemblance to bread. Bread is bread. Bread is what is to be used. Jesus took bread, says the Scriptures. We ought also to take bread. (By the way, it is not specified there that it was unleavened bread, which could have easily been done. It is the generic word for bread.)

The other element is wine. We in the church in America have gotten wiser than God about the elements that ought to be used and decided that there are too many problems with the use of wine. Nowhere in the Scriptures is grape juice prescribed for anything. It was not until the 1800's that the church even thought about using grape juice and that came with the Temperance Movement.

There are fears of wine in the church. People believe that if they drink one sip they will slip back into being sloppy drunk. Most all families of any size have a drunk in them, and people don't want to be that way. That is understood. My biological father was a drunk. I understand. The problem is, we are not free to mess with the ritual. It doesn't belong to us. It is God's and he prescribes what he prescribes. Our lives are to conform to him, and not him to us.

There are fears of medical issues. Many of these can be accommodated generally speaking. But

it is inevitably brought up that there is some medical issue that should change our use of wine to grape juice. “But what about the person whose liver has grown outside of his body and is unable to metabolize wine. If he drinks wine he will, no doubt, die on the spot!” I’m not making light of serious medical issues, but exceptions don’t make good law.

One of our problems in wanting to change from the use of wine is that we walk by sight and not by faith. God says use wine. We say, “But the latest evidence shows that even the smallest use of wine will do damage to you.”

I read in Time online that heavy drinkers outlive nondrinkers (<http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,2014332,00.html> “Why Do Heavy Drinkers Outlive Nondrinkers?” Monday Aug 30, 2010 (last accessed 9-1-10)). One day it is going to kill you, the next day it is good for your heart. The fact is that we must walk by faith. We use what God says use. We are only given to figure out the world and the way God works in it in some respects. We will never master it through science. This is why we must take what God says and operate by that word. The cup is a cup of wine. We use wine because that, in itself, is an act of faith. We are seeking to be obedient to the commands of God and faithful in our ritual practice.

Ritual as Bread to Wine

The creation of the new man

Each text that recollects the institution of the Supper is very clear on the movement in the Supper. There is a movement from bread to wine. Why this order? Jesus was rather deliberate about it, so there must be a reason for it.

There is more than one reason. The movement from bread to wine is, first of all, a movement from first things to last things. That is bread is a beginning and wine is an ending. We will see how this works out in history, but you know it from your everyday life (especially if you are wine drinker). The day begins with “bread” of some sort. You eat bread at the beginning of the day. Wine does not come until the end of the day at the evening meal or after. Wine comes when you are ready to relax. Wine is drunk when work is completed.

Jesus’ emphasis in the meal is on the cup. This is something that has been neglected in many discussions of the Supper. Whenever the presence of Christ in the Supper is discussed many people tend to focus on how he is present in the bread. But the focus of Jesus’ institution is in the cup. Note what Jesus says and does not say as he institutes the meal. Jesus does not associate the covenant with the bread. He does so with the cup. “This cup is the [new] covenant in my blood.”

There is something about the movement to the cup that is new and significant to what Jesus is doing. There is, I suggest, a movement from bread to wine. It is in the wine consumed with the bread in this new way that the New Covenant finds its newness and uniqueness in relation to everything that had come before.

In worship, Israel was always allowed to have and eat bread. It was always a part of their worship as instituted by God. Bread was the memorial offering prescribed by God in Leviticus 2. Leviticus, being practically dictated at Sinai, prescribes bread only. Why is that? Because they are in the wilderness. There is only bread and water that comes from a Rock.

Bread is prescribed for wilderness wandering. It will not be until they come into the Promised Land that produces grapes and in which they will settle that they will be able to produce wine. Numbers 15 tells us that when they come into the land, then they will have wine. But even then wine can only be used in a particular way in worship. Wine is poured out before the altar as a libation. It cannot be drunk by the worshiper near God (that is, in the Tabernacle/Temple).

Bread and wine are separated until Jesus. Jesus keeps them separated on the Table. He does not dip the bread in the wine, neither does he give them at one time. But the bread and wine are reunited (something that would have never happened in the Old Covenant). Where are they reunited? They are reunited *in the people of God when we eat the bread and then drink the wine*. What does this mean? When we eat the bread we are formed into the body of Christ. “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of one loaf” (1Cor 10.17). Whenever the people of God ate bread before God and with one another they were formed into a body.

But there is a problem before Jesus comes. The body is dead. The life is gone from it because of sin. Bread and wine are always separated before Christ. When one draws near to God in the Tabernacle/Temple he pours the wine out before God because the body and blood cannot be reunited ... at least not yet.

Before Christ comes man is dead as an individual and a community. Man is created in the image of God as individual and community. But sin brought death, which means that there is a division. Each individual is dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2.1). The world is separated into Jew and Gentile. Humanity is ripped in half. Not until Christ and his death and resurrection can we be put back together and given life.

The only time the bread and the wine can come together is when Jesus puts them together. He does so through his resurrection. Jesus, in explaining the cup/wine rite says, “For this is My blood of the [new] covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matt 26.27). Up until this point the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sins (Heb 10.4). Because sin could not be taken away, ultimately there was no life for the world. The world remained in a state of death. Sin brings death, and the world’s sin was not fully and finally dealt with. How do we know when sin is fully and finally dealt with? When Jesus rises from the dead. When God declares sins forgiven, there is a resurrection. The reason for this is that which produces death no longer has control. Jesus’ resurrection is proof positive that forgiveness of sins has taken place. All other rites and rituals up this point that spoke of the resurrection were only types and shadows. Jesus is the substance. In the cup is the forgiveness of sins. This means that in the cup is life, resurrection.

So, what does this mean for the ritual of the Supper and the movement from bread to wine? When we eat the bread first, we are formed into the body of Christ. Once the body is formed, then it can be filled with life. In the wine life is given to the body.

Think of the original creation of Adam. Adam was formed from the dust of the ground and was, at first, a breathless or spiritless being. God forms the body and then fills it with his breath/Spirit.

This is what he is doing at the Supper as well. Each week we are made a new creation. We are formed into a new body in the bread and then filled with life in the wine. Our individual lives are invigorated. We are being put back together and made new creations. Not only this, but we are

put back together in relationship with other people; that is, with the rest of this new humanity. Here there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond or free, male and female. We are all one in Christ Jesus. Humanity that was ripped apart because of sin is now put back together and given life in the body of Christ as Paul tells the Ephesians in 2.11ff.

One of the questions that is consistently asked about the Supper is being answered in meditating on the ritual actions: What does God do in the Supper? He is giving us himself in Christ and, thus, giving us true life. He is making us into the new man by forming us up as the body and then filling us with the wine that gives life.

When Paul speaks of the cup in 1Corinthians 10.16, he calls it “the cup of blessing.” “Blessing” in the Scriptures is not simply “good things happening to you.” Blessing is life. It is a favored position with God in which you enjoy the life of God himself in some form or fashion. In Genesis 1, God *blessed* the first man and woman and told them to be fruitful and multiply. Blessing is associated with life. Psalm 133.3 puts blessing and life as parallel: “For there YHWH has commanded the *blessing, life* forevermore.” Jesus, by his Spirit, forms us into his body in the bread and then enlivens us with wine. In this way, we are made into the living body of Christ each time we take this meal together.

Growing up

The movement from bread to wine is significant ritually in telling us how we are formed into the new humanity, the living body of Christ. But it is also significant in telling us that this is a part of a process that is making us into a mature humanity.

Bread is what Israel was given charge of early on. Israel was formed to be a priest to the nations. Being a priest is the first responsibility of Adam and it is the first responsibility of every human being. We are created to be worshiping creatures. Man is not primarily *homo sapien* (“wise man”) but *homo adorans* (“worshiping man”). The first thing man must do is learn to worship and live by faith, which means being loyal to him and everything he calls us to be and do. If he is faithful in this duty, he grows up to receive more responsibility.

Bread is associated with the priesthood. In fact, when Aaron and his sons are ordained as priests, one of the primary things placed in his hand that reflected his responsibility was bread (Lev 8.26). Bread is on the Table of Facebread/Showbread in the Tabernacle representing the twelve tribes. Priests could not drink wine in the presence of God. Wine is something that is reserved for later, when man has grown up to be able to handle it.

Wine becomes prominent in Scripture when kings are introduced. Joseph, practically the king of Egypt, makes his judgments with a cup (cf. Gen 44). We see cups associated with king Ahasuarus in Esther and Artaxerxes in Nehemiah. Cupbearers in Scripture are more than people who will taste the wine to make sure it is not poisoned. They are those who are in the king’s high council. They are the most trusted of all of his advisors. They give counsel to the king and petition the king. You can see this with Nehemiah who comes before the king with petitions as his cupbearer (Neh 1). No longer are they at a distance. They are brought near. They have passed the bread stage, as it were, and entered the wine stage. They have matured.

What does it mean that we have been given the cup? It means that we have matured as a humanity. We are kings and counselors to the King who sit and give counsel and petitions through prayer.

If the symbolism of this is a bit fuzzy to you, it is stated elsewhere in Scripture that we are seated with Christ in heavenly places (Eph 1, 2), and that we have been made kings and priests to our God (Rev 1). We come into the council of God and talk to him about the way the world is being run, much like Abraham did just before Sodom and the cities of the plain were destroyed (Gen 18). We tell him that Christians are dying in China and we would like him to do something about it. We tell him that people are ill and out of work and we would like him to work in those situations. We tell him about the evil schemes of our government and the governments around the world and we suggest things to him about how to remedy the situation.

We receive the cup because in Christ we are a grown-up humanity that is to be continually growing up into the mature man (Eph 4). Rejection of wine at the Lord's Table by the church as a whole in our country is quite telling. I don't think it is *the* answer to every issue, but I do think it is most certainly reflective of problems that we have and then perpetuates the problems. We don't want to grow up as a church. We want to revert to immaturity. We like everything spelled out for us in black and white like the laws in Exodus and Leviticus. We don't want to meditate on these things and work through the difficult issues. We rejected wine in the 1800's in the American evangelical world, and we have been reverting to immaturity in every conceivable way. People don't want wine in some sense because they don't want to grow up.

When you take the cup (especially after understanding this), God says, "Alright, you are kingly. This means you are going to have to lay aside all of those childish things and live the rough and tumble life of a king. Everything is not always going to be spelled out for you. You are not going to have the same emotions as you did in childhood. Your devotion will be deeper than mere feeling. You will give your life for others, not because you feel it, but because it is the right thing to do."

But growing up is difficult. Being a child is much easier. No matter what, you can't go back. You have the responsibilities. That is non-optional. You either grow-up and take on the responsibility and do what you are supposed to do, or you are disobedient and refuse to fulfill your responsibilities. In Christ, the people of God have moved forward from bread to wine. Each of us as individuals and as particular churches must reflect that as we participate in this meal.

Ritual as Participation in Christ

Ritual & Reality

We may have the tendency to think that the meaning of any ritual is dependent upon us. That is, when someone slips into ritualism with the Lord's Supper that the ritual is divested of all of its meaning. The fundamental flaw with this thinking is that it does not take the words of Jesus seriously enough. Man himself becomes the one who determines meaning. He is the one who defines his world. God's word is secondary and only becomes God's word as man gives it the authority to become God's word.

When a person moves into the sin of ritualism, the ritual itself is not divested of meaning. It means something different for the person who responds to God's Word in this way, but it is not "meaningless." It may be meaningless *to that person* because he does not care about the meaning of it, but it is certainly not meaningless.

Jesus made it clear in his words that the bread and the wine in the context of this ritual are

identified with his own body and blood. *His* words of institution and command give this meal meaning just as our very existence is defined for us by God and not something left up to our own imaginations or whether or not we choose to believe it.

In the beginning God created us by his word and declared that we are made in his image. That word of creation defines for us who we are. We may rebel against it, not conforming ourselves to what God says about us, but it does not change the immutable reality of God's word. So, when we come to the Word of God in the Supper and we hear, "This is my body" and "This is my blood," we cannot doubt that what Jesus said is true. We can never say that our response determines the authority or validity of that word.

Jesus makes it clear in the ritual of the words spoken that we do participate in him when we eat this bread and drink this cup in the context of the church's ritual meal. I am not going to get into the "mechanics" of how we participate in Christ in the meal. Digging into that has its advantages in some respects, but it is ultimately a mystery. Calvin in a letter to Peter Martyr Vermigli said after much meditation on the presence of Christ in the Supper, "Hence I adore the mystery rather than labor to understand it" (quoted in Gerrish, [Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin](#)). How everything works in the Supper is, indeed, a mystery that we may never understand. But the fact of participation in Christ in the Supper is beyond dispute. We know we participate in Christ because Jesus said so. Period.

Jesus did not say, "This bread becomes my body *if* you respond thus-and-so" or "This cup becomes my blood of the [new] covenant *if* you respond this way." Rather, in the ritual we participate in the body and blood of Jesus. It is received by all, but it is not received by all to the same effect. It has meaning for everyone because God himself gives it meaning. But the meaning is not the same for everyone.

The *effects* of receiving the body and blood of Jesus *are* dependent upon how it is received by us. If it is received by faith, then there are saving effects. If it is not received by faith, then there are damning effects. It is intended for life, but when it is not received by faith, it becomes death to the one partaking.

So it is with the preaching of the gospel. The response of the hearer does not determine the validity of the message. The message is true no matter how a person responds. The message has meaning to every person that hears the gospel. To some it will be to their damnation and to others their salvation. The ritual then is not vested or divested with essential meaning by us. We participate in Christ, in his body and blood, when we eat this bread and drink this cup. Our response to God in this meal determines the effect of the meal on us. But it *is* effective one way or another.

Communion in the Body of Christ

When Jesus took the bread he said, "This is my body." I touched earlier upon the fact that it is proper that Jesus used this world's substance to represent himself to us. The eternal Son became one with this world in his incarnation. He took on the matter of creation as the eternal Son and became the man, Christ Jesus. Before the incarnation the eternal Son was not flesh. The apostle John makes it clear that the eternal Word—the Son—*became* flesh (Jn 1.14). He took on the body, the flesh, that he is now presenting to us in this ritual meal. This is his *body*.

Communing with Christ's body means that we participate in his humanity. We share in who he is as the man Christ Jesus. We share in the life that he lived and continues to live. We share in his death, his resurrection, his mission, his victory, his ascension, his lordship, and all things as such. Everything that Jesus is and accomplished in his incarnation is promised and offered to us in this Supper.

After his resurrection, Jesus ascended on high to the right hand of the Father in heaven, being anointed by the Spirit, coronated as King. He is the human King we have always needed and looked for. As the human King who receives the Spirit, he pours out his Spirit on those who participate in his body. We see this at Pentecost. We are anointed as kings as we participate in Jesus' body. We are anointed ones; or to put it in common language: we are *Christians*.

Participating in his body, his humanity, means that we participate in his resurrection. There are so many implications of this, but there is one that I think is not often explained that needs to be understood. United with the resurrected body of Jesus means that our bodies are perfected even now. Even though we may suffer the effects of disease, deformation, or malformation, our bodies are perfected being united to Christ's resurrected humanity. When we keep this in Scriptural context, we can understand the importance of it.

Those who were in line to become priests could only do so if they did not have any physical imperfections. If they were deformed or malformed in some way, they were not able to become priests and, thus, unable to draw near to God as a priest ought to be able to do. But in the resurrected body of Jesus, our physical maladies are healed. We have been perfected bodily in his resurrection and are therefore able to draw near to God ... even if we still have these physical imperfections.

This doesn't mean that we can "claim our healing" now. It means that we are healed in Christ no matter what we are enduring now. That healing will ultimately be made manifest in the final resurrection of the dead when we finally become what we have been declared to be in Christ. Because we participate in the resurrected humanity of Christ, we are healed and able to draw near to God. So, as we eat this bread it is both the declaration that we have been healed as well as the promise of final resurrection when we will be made whole physically, when this mortal takes on immortality.

Jesus presents to us in this meal his body, his humanity. As we contemplate that, we must never forget that his humanity does not stand alone. God the Son became a man without becoming any less God. He is God and man. In him humanity is joined with God in an inexorable union. In God the Son, the Word made flesh, God joins himself to creation and, preeminently, man. So, to participate in the humanity of Jesus means that we also participate in the life of God. In Jesus' humanity we are united with the eternal God. In the Son, Jesus, we have communion with the Father by the Spirit. United to Jesus' humanity means that we are pulled in, as it were, to the divine family. We share in this family meal.

This reality reminds us where we are when we eat this meal. Here, at the Lord's Table, heaven and earth are joined together. We are no more on earth than we are in heaven and we are no more in heaven than we are on earth. Just as the humanity and deity of the Son cannot be torn apart, so we cannot tear apart the union created in him between heaven and earth. It is that unity between heaven and earth that we are experiencing each and every time we come to this Table and eat the bread, the body of Christ.

This reality is both glorious and treacherous. In his humanity Jesus has broken down every veil that kept humanity from being near God. Being near to God is a wonderful privilege and there are inexplicable glories in his presence. But being near God can also be a frightening thing. The writer of Hebrews labors to tell us of the glorious privileges as well as the frightening prospects of drawing near to God in the New Covenant. When we don't respond in faith to the promises of God, it does not go well with us.

Being joined to Christ's humanity, his body, also means that we are a part of his church. I dealt with this some earlier when I wrote of the meal as a community meal. But here we see it is again. Jesus' body is used ambiguously throughout the New Testament to refer to the man Jesus as well as to his people, the church. Paul is most famous for speaking of the church as the body of Christ.

This informs us as to the context and meaning of the meal as well. When you participate in this meal you do so as a member of his church. This is not a matter of private devotion. There are no lone ranger Christians. We only participate in Christ as we are joined to his body. It is only around this Table that we are formed up into the body of Christ and enlivened. This is the central place where we grow up as Christians. To live as a Christian means living as a vital member of Christ's church. You cannot separate your personal relationship with Jesus from union with his church. Life is found within his body, not apart from it.

Communion in the blood of Christ

We not only participate in the body of Christ, but we also have fellowship with the blood of Christ. Jesus said, "This is my blood." This again, means much more than we can ever contemplate in a short paper, but there are some things we can ponder. We know that is through the blood of Christ that we are saved from the wrath of God (Rom 5.9). This is because in his blood we have redemption from sins (Eph 1.7; Col 1.14). These are not abstract images in the Scriptures but point to something quite particular; namely, the Passover and Exodus. Being saved from God's wrath through the blood of Christ is Passover. It is the blood that is displayed on the doors that averts the wrath of God from the firstborn sons, delivering them from death. In fact, Paul puts the meal in the context of Passover in 1Corinthians 5.

Redemption is a rich word. The *redeemer* biblically speaking is more properly "near-kinsman." The near-kinsman had several responsibilities. The near-kinsman had the responsibility to redeem land that was sold by his kinsman because of poverty (Lev 25.23-34). Also, if his near-kinsman sells himself into indentured servitude, his near-kinsman is to redeem him through buying him back (Lev 25.47-55).

To participate in the blood of Christ, that blood being the redemption of our sins, means that Jesus is saying that we are his near-kinsman. He is delivering us from the slavery into which we sold ourselves. This is precisely what happens in Egypt as God provides blood and delivers his people from the slavery of Egypt. So we now participate in the blood of Christ as our near-kinsman and are delivered in our participation in this meal.

The near-kinsman also had another responsibility. He was the avenger of blood. That is, if one of his close kin was murdered, the near-kinsman was to hunt him down and execute him to cleanse the land from the blood guilt (cf. Num 35.9-34). When blood was shed unjustly through murder or even through what we call manslaughter, that blood defiled the land and had to be avenged. It

was the responsibility of the near-kinsman to do this.

When we participate in the blood of Jesus, the blood is displayed in us for our deliverance—redemption—or destruction—vengeance. Pharaoh poured out the blood of babies and God came to avenge them. So, when we drink the cup, the blood of Jesus Christ, in an unworthy manner, we call up the avenger of blood. Think about it this way: Adam is made from the dust of the ground. When you drink this cup, blood is being poured out on the ground. This will call up the avenger.

So how is it that we can become guilty of the body and blood of Jesus so that the avenger is called up? When you murder him. How can this be done? When you destroy his people, his church.

Remember what Paul heard on the road to Damascus when the risen Jesus confronted him: “Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?” (Ac 9.4) Saul was persecuting Jesus because he was persecuting his body, the church. This is the way we should understand what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11 about the warnings. The people in Corinth were tearing up the body of Christ in so many different ways and then celebrating the Supper. In doing so they called up the Avenger, the near-kinsman, and many were sick and many slept (that is, died). You can’t destroy the church of Jesus Christ, his people, and expect no repercussions. He is the near-kinsman.

We have communion with the blood of Christ in the Supper. It is to our deliverance or to our destruction, but we do have communion with the blood of Christ.

Ritual as Thanksgiving

Ritual of Peace

Jesus takes bread, according to Matthew, and blesses. He takes the cup and gives thanks. The offering of praise, and more specifically thanks in this meal evokes the allusion to the peace offering found in Lev 7.11ff.

Jesus giving thanks is not just general appreciation; though that is certainly involved. This meal is the fulfillment of all of the meals in the old creation rituals. Certain aspects about the ritual that Jesus gives us draw lines back to some of those meals. The peace offering in Levitical worship could be offered at different times and on different occasions. Interestingly enough, the peace offering was the only offering in which the one who brought the offering—the worshiper—could actually eat. All of the other offerings were either completely consumed in the fire or eaten in part by the priests of the Tabernacle. But the peace offering was one in which the worshiper who was drawing near could eat of some of the substance of that which he brought.

In Leviticus 7 we learn that there are different types of peace offerings. The first one mentioned is brought near when God has blessed you in a special way. The worshiper freely and willingly responds by drawing near with a confession or thanksgiving and offers up unleavened bread for the altar and leavened bread which will be eaten by him. This meal celebrated by the worshiper in the presence of God is a thanksgiving. The peace offering in general is one that celebrates and communicates peace between God and the worshiper. A particular thanksgiving peace offering is one that celebrates the particular goodness of God in a given situation. How appropriate it is for the meal that Jesus gave us that we offer thanks in the context of a peace offering! The work that God does in Christ brings peace. We are giving thanks for this particular goodness of God

demonstrated to us.

Ritual of Joy and Gratitude

This ritual meal needs to be understood in the context of the peace offering. This meal, therefore, is a meal of joy and gratitude. Jesus showed us this when he blessed God and gave thanks. We may associate blessing with the bread, but it seems more feasible that Jesus was blessing God for the bread. That is, he was praising God or giving thanks. Luke and Paul both translate this rite before the bread as giving thanks. So, they are virtually synonymous.

Blessing God is essentially praising him. It is difficult to distinguish blessing/praising God and thanksgiving in Scripture. When you praise someone there is within that an attitude of gratitude. You appreciate and are grateful for this characteristic in or gift from another person that has been made evident. So, blessing God and giving thanks may have slightly different emphases, but they cannot be separated. One thing that is true about both is the fact that they both express that this is a time of joy and gratitude.

This makes sense in the biblical context because we are eating and not fasting. Feasting in the Bible is meant for joy. In fact, Ecclesiastes says that feasts are made for laughter (Ecc 10.19). Bread strengthens man and wine cheers him (Ps 104.15). This is a feast with bread and wine that strengthens us and should cheer our hearts. This is a time of joy and gratitude to God.

Nietzsche said of Christians that we have no joy. He would not have to go much further than any common communion service in just about any Christian church to come to this conclusion. There he would see dourness exemplified. This is a terrible indictment of the church. Sadly, it is quite true on many fronts.

There are a number of reasons why we may not be festive at the meal. It could be that we have been taught from a really young age that this is the time to turn the lights way down low and play somber music and think about how unworthy you are. That is probably the main reason. We need to be continually getting out of that. One way this might be done is singing during communion. Singing is not necessarily the best way to do it, but we have been steeped in this for so long that it is difficult for people to start talking, laughing, and enjoying one another in this meal.

Someone may respond, "But this is a serious meal." Yes, it is. But serious need not mean somber, and that can be shown throughout the Scriptures to be the case. God wants joy in his presence.

Another reason that we may lack joy in the Supper is because we are ungrateful. Maybe we are taking things for granted. Maybe we have become ritualistic. We just don't think much of it anymore and have lost perspective on what God in Christ has done for us. If that is the case, the ritual of the Supper should rebuke that type of thinking and heart attitude.

Jesus gives us the pattern: bless or give thanks and then eat and drink.

Thanks for what?

When we consider the original setting of this meal, we learn what it means to be thankful. The ritual teaches us that blessing God and thanksgiving are appropriate at all times and in all circumstances. Jesus is giving thanks when this meal is anticipating his own death. Remember,

he takes the cup and gives thanks for it. In just a little while he will be asking the Father for deliverance from this cup because he knows what is in it. Yet, in this meal, he gives thanks for the cup. In this we learn that thanksgiving does not deny the difficult realities of life and the even the prospects of death. Rather, thanksgiving is offered even when facing those realities.

Thanksgiving confesses faith and hope in the God who delivers us through these things. Jesus doesn't want to go through this. But Jesus also knows that if his Father takes him through these things, he will be delivered. Because of this, he could give thanks in every situation. Hebrews 12.1-2 says that Jesus endured the cross despising the same for the joy that was set before him. He can give thanks because he has sure confidence that the traumas of death, though difficult, will not be the end.

We follow the same pattern in our lives. We have difficulties. We have pain. We have suffering. Eventually we will die. How in the world can we give thanks? We can give thanks because God has promised that this is not the end and that it will be through these things that he will deliver us. Why are we then depressed? Why do we have no joy? Why are we despondent? Or to ask it in the way the Psalmist asks it, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" Hope in God! We can give thanks and have joy because we have hope in God even in the most difficult of times.

Maybe we look at the little bit of bread and the little bit of wine that we eat and drink and think, "Give thanks for what?" There is not much exciting about what we do, especially when we do the same thing week after week. One thing that God teaches us through this is that what we are given by God, no matter how insignificant and insufficient it looks to us, is completely sufficient. We walk by faith and not by sight. We are taught to be thankful to God for what he gives us. No matter how small it may seem, it is sufficient for us.

Gratitude is a matter of faith. The root of ingratitude is unbelief. I can be thankful to God because I trust what he says. I know by what God says that in and through this bread and wine he is giving me what I need.

The meal is to remind us that our lives are lived by faith. This is why it is not appropriate to have dog and pony shows accompanying the meal. This is why it is not appropriate to make it look "more religious" by adding extra things to the ritual. This is why we need not change it all of the time. If we become ungrateful we are cultivating the soil for discontentment to grow. When we become ungrateful we begin to go outside of God's Word and look for things other than what he has given us. We need more than God and what he has given us. God is not meeting our needs with this little bit. We need more. We become like the children of Israel in the wilderness who grow dissatisfied with the manna in the wilderness.

Gratitude is the soil and nourishment of contentment. The ritual of the Lord's Supper as given to us by Jesus makes us give thanks week after week for things that can't be seen or understood completely. The ritual of the Lord's Supper brings us face to face with the life of faith and says, "You must give thanks to God for these things." The ritual forces us to give thanks and examine whether or not we are content with what God has given to us in Christ or whether or not we are discontent and are seeking for something outside of him to satisfy us.

God says that in this meal he gives to us Christ. This is his body and his blood in bread and wine. Is that enough for us? Are we content with that? Are we thankful? Are we joyful even though are

circumstances are less than ideal?

The thanksgiving that we offer up to God at this meal is to shape the way we live all of life. We are to live grateful lives, lives that rest in the promises of God so that no matter what we endure or what others may do to us, we may still be joyful and grateful.

Christ instituted this ritual meal as an effective ritual so that when we participate in it we commune with him. We do so unto life or unto death, but we do so unquestionably. This ritual meal is a meal of thanksgiving. It is the declaration of peace with God in Christ and teaches us that all that God gives us is ultimately for our good. Therefore, we can be joyful and give thanks. Now, let us eat, drink, and live as grateful people.