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In Remembrance of Jesus

Allan McNicol

Carved across the front of the communion tables in many churches are the words, “Do This in Remembrance of Me.” Those of us whose ancestry in the Restoration Movement goes back a way, vividly recall the countless times we have looked at these words and have pondered their significance.

Indeed, if there are any words that we have talked about and considered more in connection with our observance of the Lord’s Supper one would be hard put to say what they are. It is no accident that among us the Lord’s Supper, invoking the image of memory, is referred to as a “memorial feast.”

Anyone familiar with Churches of Christ would agree that the imagery of memory of the sacrifice of Christ is central to our worship experience at the Lord’s Table.

But perhaps we are getting a little ahead of ourselves. In an age when the worship wars have centered on debates as to what extent current cultural practices in music and ethos should be welcomed in the assembly, some may well ask, “Why are we drawing attention to the Lord’s Supper?” The answer is simple. Hidden behind all the talk about the need to express our emotions and feelings in worship, especially with music, is a foundational question. How do we encounter the presence of the risen Lord in the assembly?

It may come as a surprise to some to hear the answer of the early church. Rather than in a jovial session of praise music in a great amphitheater, the traditional Christian response to this question was to say, “At the Lord’s Table!”

If true spiritual renewal is to blossom among us it surely cannot bypass the central feature of a Christian assembly—the spiritual feast at the Table of the risen Lord. During the past decade our assemblies have been bombarded constantly with changes ranging from new techniques in communication to the use of top-of-the-line technological gadgetry—claiming to assist us in sensing God’s presence in a deeper way. Perhaps we are looking in the wrong place. If the Churches of Christ are not going to catapult into some sub-set of neo-Pentecostalism we may give serious reconsideration to refocusing on an old standby—our weekly appointment at the Table of the Lord.

Our Task

In this essay we wish to renew the claim that the observance of the Lord’s Supper ought to be the central feature of the Sunday morning assembly. We will argue that for this to occur some reform will be necessary in the way that we structure our observance of the Supper. Current practices tend to obscure rather than enhance the importance of the Lord’s Supper with respect to what takes place in the assembly.

Procedurally, first we will give a précis of the worship of the early church drawing attention to the importance that believers attached to the Lord’s Meal (Supper). The topic is almost inexhaustible in scope. Our focus will be on the role of remembrance. We will argue that as a gathered remembering community, it was at the table, that the central claims of the faith were most vividly displayed by the early Christians. Second, we will explore the connection between remembering and Jesus’ presence in the Christian community today. Finally, we will conclude by making several

specific suggestions regarding the way we observe the Lord's Supper with a view toward recovering its importance in the contemporary worship experience.

The Early Christian Witness

Essentially, in the New Testament, there are two types of accounts that give us information concerning the Lord's Supper. First, in Matthew and Mark we have quite similar narratives that explain what happened at the Last Passover of Jesus' life. As part of their narration of the Last Passover there is a description of what Jesus said about the bread and the cup on the fateful night before the day of his death (Matt 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–26). These words are connected with a sequence of events leading up to his impending death. Thus, for Matthew and Mark, the Last Supper (Passover Meal) is noted as one more link (very significant to be sure) in a chain of events that make up the last days of the story of Jesus' Life: a building block in the account of his biography.

On the other hand, the account given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11, (and also Luke), pictures what happened at the Last Supper somewhat differently.¹ Both Paul and Luke understand these events as a “founding account.”² In other words something took place there that was the first in

¹ The key differences in the wording between the authors of the Synoptic Gospels and Paul are compiled in many different secondary works. For a handy analysis one may consult I. Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), 30–56.

² One difference between Paul and Luke is that Luke, as the other Synoptics, sets the institution of the Lord's Supper in Jesus' observance of the Passover feast the night before he was crucified (Luke 22:1, 7–13, 15, 20). However, there is no reference to the Passover in Paul's founding account in 1 Cor 11:23b–25. The reference to the “cup of blessing” in 1 Cor 10:16 is thought by some to be an echo of a Passover meal. But the terminology is common for an expression for thanks when a cup of wine is passed during a formal meal even beyond Judaism. Cf. Otfried Hofius, “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* NGS 6 (ed. Ben F. Meyer: Macon: Georgia: Mercer

what would become a long stream of numerous repetitions of a religious observance. For Luke and Paul, Jesus sets up the prototype or model for how we are “to do” the Supper. At the heart of this is the traditional wording, “Do This in Remembrance of Me.” It is found only in Luke and Paul (Luke 22:19 and 1 Cor 11:24, 25). Indeed, the text of 1 Cor 11:25 is quite striking. In connection with the cup saying the text says, “Do this, as often as you drink (i.e., the cup) for the purpose of remembering me.”

Now this is all well and good. But the question remains (even for those who observe the command week after week, year after year), how do you do this? How do we go about remembering a past action so that it is more spiritually satisfying than just a mental remembering or imagining of the events of the last days of Jesus? To deal with this issue, it is time to go below the surface to see in more detail what ancient believers considered to be involved with the phrase: “Do this for the purpose of remembering me.”

“Do This in Remembrance of Me” in 1 Corinthians 11:17–34

Paul’s “founding account” of the Supper (1 Cor 11:23b–25) occurs as part of a wider discussion of a problem that had emerged in the church at Corinth. Believers gathered in a home on Sunday Evening for a meal together. The textual discussion (1 Cor 11:17–22) indicates that this meal was similar to a kind known widely in the Greco-Roman world as an *eranos* (where the host provides the space but the guests supply the food).³ The gathering would commence with a prayer for the bread which functioned as a profession of thanks to God for providing the loaf—a vital form of sustenance. After the

University, 1993), 85. At least, as far as Paul is concerned, any connection between the Lord’s Supper and the Passover is not highlighted.

³ It has some similarity with the “Potluck” dinner that is very popular in many congregations today. However, it seemed that at Corinth the believers ate only the food which they brought. This meant that some (especially the wealthy) had a far more commodious table than others. Understandably this became a point of contention.

meal the meeting ended with a similar expression said over the cup. Apparently, since some had better provisions than others at the house-meeting divisions occurred. This resulted in some being shamed and marginalized in their participation of the Lord's meal. Paul considered this an outrage and gave instructions to rectify the situation. At the conclusion of what he had to say, he urged all to treat one another with kindness appropriate to an event that rehearsed the center of the Christian story (1 Cor 11:33).⁴

The "founding account," then, is given as the basis for Paul's instruction. It is in this "founding account" that the words on remembrance occur and to which shortly we will direct our attention.

Paul narrates that he received from the tradition that on the night Jesus was betrayed he took bread, and after having given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This *is* my body which is on behalf of you" (1 Cor 11:23b–24a). A wording of similar length, "This cup *is* the new covenant in my blood" was pronounced after taking the cup (1 Cor 11:25a). These words are known as the words of bestowal. What is crucial to grasp is the *connection* made between the words of bestowal and actions of Jesus and the participation by the disciples which took place subsequently. For Paul, Jesus is saying that the bread and its subsequent eating *is* or *bestows* a participation or share in the benefits of the crucified body of Jesus on the cross (cf. 1 Cor 10:16); and, likewise, sharing the cup indicates an acceptance of Jesus' offer to bestow the benefits of the new covenant inaugurated by his death. In brief, as Otfried Hofius has noted with respect to what Paul is saying here:

⁴ The translation "wait for another" in 1 Cor 11:33 is very unfortunate. A better translation of 1 Cor 11:33 is "Thus my brethren, when you come together to eat *show hospitality to one another.*" See further the comments in my article "Lord's Supper" in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (editor-in-chief David Noel Freedman: Grand Rapids/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 822–824.

Whoever eats the eucharistic bread and drinks the eucharistic cup receives and so has a share in the salvation that has been settled by the expiatory death of Christ.⁵

Of course, for Jesus, Paul, or the earliest Christians, these words of bestowal were not understood to entail any change in the substance or nature of the material bread and fruit of the vine on the table. Rather these words of bestowal functioned as a prayer (Paul uses the word *eucharistein* = “to give thanks”) consecrating the elements of the bread and cup to be spiritual food and drink for the believing community. In daily life food consecrated by prayer for the purposes of nourishing our bodies does not change materially as a result of the prayer. Likewise, The bread and cup at the Lord’s meal becomes sanctified spiritual food (without material change). Participation of this food enables the believer to claim a share in the benefits of Jesus’ death.⁶

How do the bread and the cup function as spiritual food? The answer to this question involves acquiring some appreciation for the biblical concept of remembrance. In the “founding account” of the Lord’s meal after the words of bestowal *both* with the bread and the cup, comes an additional statement, “Do *this* for the purpose of remembering me” (1 Cor 11:24, 25).

We have been conditioned by over familiarity not to pay special attention to the antecedent of “this” (Greek *touto*). Indeed if we think of it at all we refer the “this” to the entire observance of the Lord’s Supper as an ordinance for the church. Understanding “this” in the latter sense we run into considerable difficulty. For, as we have noticed, the Lord’s Supper in the earliest Christian community was a full meal. If the “this” refers to all

⁵ Hofius, “The Lord’s Supper,” 99.

⁶ The process of sanctifying material things for a spiritual purpose is explained by Everett Ferguson, “The Lord’s Supper in Church History: The Early Church Through the Medieval Period” in *The Lord’s Supper: Believers Church Perspectives*, ed. D.R. Stoffer (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1997), 21–22.

that Paul presumed was operative in Corinth then on what grounds do we separate a concentration on the bread and the cup from the whole meal?⁷ And this is a command!

But, on taking a closer look, there is a more obvious antecedent to the “(do) this” of 1 Cor 11:24, 25. That antecedent is Jesus’ action in taking the bread, giving thanks, breaking it and distributing it with the words of bestowal (cf. Luke 22:19). The context to which the phraseology of remembrance has been appended, refers to the total action of Jesus at the table culminating in the words of bestowal over the bread and the cup. At the center of these actions of Jesus are two prayers of thanksgiving. As will be noted below, the prayers of thanksgiving involved a recital of the “founding event” of salvation. Their very expression was to be for the purpose of “remembering.”

And not just, “remembering” the event at Calvary as a thing in itself. As countless presiders at the table have reminded us, the biblical concept of memory goes far beyond a mere memorial ceremony. Based on the entire story of God’s faithfulness to his creation in the call of Abraham, Exodus, the sustaining of a special people through all sorts of perils, and finally in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, the church comes to the table with rich memories of the history of salvation. This memory is to be invoked in the prayers over the bread and cup. It presumes that in the wording of these prayers we draw upon the Hebrew concept of “remembering” (Hebrew *zekher/zikaron*).⁸ This not only involves a recital of the history of salvation as though one was present at the original event but, even more, that we use

⁷ This problem cannot be overcome simply by quoting 1 Cor 11:34. The generally received understanding of this text is not that Paul is advocating any change in the practice of the Corinthians but that the Lord’s meal is not the place to bring an excess supply of food for some kind of major repast.

⁸ In the Greek Bible *anamnēsis*.

recital of sacred history to integrate and re-assemble the fractured pieces of our own lives into the tapestry of God's wider story of his people and their purpose in history⁹. As with the psalms one *remembers* by *proclaiming* the marvelous deeds of the one who brings our salvation.¹⁰ Therefore the remembrance of Christ takes place not only in the word of the presider and the actions of breaking the bread and pouring the cup at the table but most significantly in the prayers of thanksgiving for the bread and cup. Indeed, Paul reminded the Christians at Corinth, "for as often as you carry on this practice you *proclaim* the Lord's death (the true significance of the events at Calvary) until he comes" (I Cor 11:26). Thus Paul is very concerned that the communal life of the Corinthian church conforms with the rhetoric of their prayers where Jesus is invoked as the one who committed himself for others even to the death of the cross.

By understanding "remembrance" as a dynamic process of continuing to claim a share in the benefits of Jesus' death, resulting in a continual reassessment and reintegration of our lives, we transcend the banal idea held by some that the Lord's Supper is simply "meeting a requirement." Rather, the Lord's Supper is the connecting link with the only true source of nourishment for our spiritual lives. The German scholar Gerhard Lohfink says it well.

How crucial memory is. The life of the people of God depends on it. In this sense the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist is not a luxury that the baptized can permit themselves according to their own mood or convenience, but

⁹ In an unpublished paper Rabbi David Stern, entitled "Remembering and Redemption," speaking of the Passover Seder (recital), the Hebrew analogue to the Christian expression of thanks for the bread and cup says, "The ultimate goal of the Seder . . . for all of its drama of identification, is not to make the Exodus contemporaneous to the participant. The identification with the story is only a vehicle. The goal is to remember the reality of redemption: to re-assemble our own world-view in accord with the Haggadah's progression from degradation to dignity, to reintegrate into our lives the reality of a God who hears the cry of the oppressed."

¹⁰ As for example in Pss 77:12; 105:1-5; and 114:4.

sometimes they can just as easily do without. The Sunday celebration is a necessity of life, for after at most a week the community is in danger of losing its memory. The continual erosion of memory and the constant danger of individual isolation work against the constant memory of the eucharistic celebration.¹¹

Our appearance at the Lord's Table represents a continual elongation of what took place on the night before Jesus died. In this feast of remembrance we not only claim the benefits of the death of Christ but pledge anew that we may live a life worthy of the commitment that Christ displayed in the giving of his life. In this sense we replicate the situation of the twelve who gathered around Jesus on the fateful night before his death and stand in direct continuity with them.

Jesus' Presence With Us Today

Jaroslav Pelikan would regularly say in his lectures that from the earliest days when Christians gathered together "it would always be around a table of some sort." Believers have always considered that their observance of the Lord's meal was in direct continuity with the Last Supper. If this is the case in what sense do we conceive that Jesus was and is present in the later communities? Tragically this became, and remains today, a divisive issue among believers.

Interestingly enough, for the New Testament writers it was not a point of contention. For example, there is no compelling evidence in the New Testament to indicate that Paul considered that Jesus was present in the Supper in any way that was different from his abiding presence through the Spirit in the early Christian community.¹² Probably the writer of the Gospel of John considered that observance of the Supper played a very important

¹¹ Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church: Toward a Theology of the People of God*. (trans. Linda Maloney: Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical, 1999), 252.

¹² As noted by Hofius, "The Lord's Supper," 100.

role for the spiritual life of the community (John 6:52–59). But again, this Gospel does not indicate that eating the bread and drinking the cup was the crucial determinative factor that made available the presence of the Son.¹³

Somewhere along the line things took a different turn. More and more the focus came on “when” and “how” the true or real presence of Christ was realized at the table.¹⁴ In the West the “when” of the real presence came in the eucharistic prayer of consecration. The “how” came in the transformation of the bread and wine into the real “unbloodied” presence of

¹³ This is not to deny that the early Christians believed in the presence of Christ at the eucharistic meal in the assembly. Hints of this are found in the Johannine writings, especially in Revelation. We know that the book of Revelation was to be read aloud to the churches (Rev 1:3, 4). If the book were read in installments in the assembly, (as some think), then it is interesting to note that key references to the risen Lord coming to his people, couched in compatible eucharistic terminology, occur at key intervals in the book (Rev 2:7, 17; 3:20; 7:16; 11:17; 14:14–20; 19:7, 9; 22:20, 21). Perhaps these references are signals to the congregation to end the reading of an installment and participate in the Supper. But, even granted that this view is plausible, there is no direct connection made between Jesus’ presence being dependent upon a particular procedure in the liturgy. Nevertheless, many in ancient Christianity saw a close connection between the bread and the cup and the presence of Jesus. In the early second century Ignatius of Antioch argued that since it was critical to believe that the Son of God was present among us in “flesh and blood” during his earthly life, and after his resurrection (Luke 24:39), then at the table his presence was just as real as earlier (Ignatius *To the Smyrneans* 7:1). This idea, fueled especially by the invocation of the words, “This is my body,” became well-traveled in the church. Other important teachers elaborated upon it even more concretely. Justin Martyr (an important mid-second century teacher) for example, claimed that the consecrated bread and cup resulted in a similar transformation akin to the manifestation of the Logos in flesh and blood in the incarnation. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 66:1, 2. Similar statements can be found in Irenaeus and the Alexandrian Theologians. Such terminology may be justifiable as long as it is used to underscore the point that Christianity is not a timeless myth but derives its validity from the historical reality of the flesh and blood crucifixion of the Son of God, who risen, comes in actuality to his community. But somewhere along the line a threshold was crossed where it became much more.

¹⁴ In popular parlance this is known as the doctrine of the “real presence”. For those in the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Episcopal (Anglican), and Lutheran traditions, this understanding is a prerequisite for a legitimate Eucharist.

Jesus on the altar.¹⁵ The entire process became known as the Eucharistic mystery.

These claims go beyond the clear teaching of Scripture. As we have seen, Paul teaches that at the Lord's Table we are nourished by spiritual food and drink that mediates to us the benefits of Christ's death. In this sense this spiritual food is the body and blood of Christ. But beyond this the bread and the cup do not signify anything special of Jesus' presence beyond his abiding power through the Spirit to rest in the life of believers in the community.

Thus the claims of these traditions that came to full flower in the medieval synthesis on the Eucharist were contested at the Reformation—especially by Zwingli and Calvin.¹⁶ As an outgrowth of the Reformed Tradition, theological thinking in Churches of Christ about the Lord's Supper has maintained reservations with regards to the eucharistic doctrine of “the real presence of Christ.” The divide is critical because it represents fundamental differences over the nature of how Jesus abides in his church. Communities that have a strong belief in the doctrine of the “real presence” occurring at a special moment at the communion table tend to conceive of the Eucharist as “the be-all and end-all” of worship. Communities that conceive of the church as a fellowship of believers empowered by the Spirit under the word celebrate the presence of Jesus in various and sundry ways in the worship. Since Churches of Christ fall into the latter category it is distressing to see many of our people (especially on liturgical days of the church year) attending Episcopal or Catholic churches and communing around their tables. Such activities not only show misunderstanding of our own

¹⁵ See William H. Willamon, *Word, Water, Wine and Bread: How Worship has Changed Over the Years* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1992), 54–58.

¹⁶ A.I.C. Heron, *Table and Tradition: Toward an Ecumenical Understanding of the Eucharist* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 114–145. Also Marshall, “Last Supper and Lord's Supper,” who writes from a similar outlook.

beliefs about the Lord's Supper and worship in general, but also is a callous expression of disrespect for the deeply held connections of our religious neighbors who differ with us on this point.¹⁷

At the Table Today

A question is often asked, "What am I supposed to think and do when I come to the table week by week?" Is there something more besides being grateful for the once-and-for-all sacrifice at Calvary?

In this essay we have attempted to argue that when we come to the Table we do two main things.¹⁸ First, in the actions at the table, especially in the prayers of thanks for the bread and cup, and in their distribution, we both *rehearse* the redeeming acts of salvation, and through our participation, we re-affirm our claim to a share in that salvation. Through this process of remembering and proclamation our lives are reconfigured and, by the power of the Spirit, we nourish our growth in the way of salvation. Second, in the course of our engagement in this network of reality, we *pledge* anew to live lives worthy of the Gospel. Rehearsal of the sacred story, sharing in its benefits, and renewed commitment in light of it stand at the heart of our remembrance of Jesus.

¹⁷ In a fascinating article George Lindbeck, "The Eucharist Tastes Bitter in the Divided Church," *Spectrum* 19/1 (Spring, 1999): 1, 4–5, a Lutheran, explains carefully the position of those in the Catholic tradition who argue that "the Lord's Table must be fenced or it ceases to be sacred." Essentially their position is that the Eucharist, as well as being a vehicle for the divine presence, is a sign of oneness between Christ and the Catholic Church. To invite participation by those who do not share this conviction is, according to this view, to declare openly that the body of Christ is divided. This writer does not endorse this line of reasoning. But he does have respect for others who hold this view with conviction. Thus out of respect for them, he will not take the Eucharist in these contexts.

¹⁸ A third major occurrence at the table should be noted. It is at the table we beseech the Lord to bring full circle to consummation the work of new creation that was started at Golgotha. The Lord's Supper is an anticipation of the Messianic banquet of the new world. This ought to be highlighted more but the eschatological dimension of the Supper has not been the focus of this paper.

Because we do not always highlight these critical points in the way we observe the Supper, we conclude with several brief observations concerning several procedural points that would be helpful in implementing the understanding set forth in this paper.

First, it is imperative that Churches of Christ retain the table in a prominent place in the church meeting house. Architecture is important. The removal of the table leaving only a pulpit and the appearance of servers who mysteriously emerge to serve the bread and cup is not a helpful development. The crucial symmetry between word and table is overturned and the impression is left that the Lord's Supper is merely something that must be "taken care of" before the preacher comes to the pulpit. And, at the very minimum, before partaking a presider ought to replicate the process set forth in I Cor 11:23–25. Otherwise it is hard to make the case that one is "doing *this* in remembrance of Jesus."

Second, some years ago an aged and wise brother grabbed my arm after the morning service and said, "Did you notice that the person saying the prayers at the Lord's Table did not mention a word about the death of Christ!" This author has argued strongly that actions of the one presiding at the table such as breaking the bread and pouring out the cup can enhance visually what is being signified in our observance of the Supper. But, if our argumentation about the importance of the prayers at the table is correct, then it is clear that those who have responsibility in this area should be briefed as to the importance of what they do and say in the communion prayers.

Indeed, finally, the whole issue of who ought to preside at the Lord's Table is worthy of reconsideration. By the second century it was the usual practice of the church to only allow the elders to serve as president at the table. While we should resist clerical tendencies in our view of ministry (the priesthood of all believers is a blessed truth), the regular practice of an elder

standing behind the table may be a way of expressing the gravity and significance of what is taking place.

Conclusion

In this essay we have sought to show that the concept of remembrance is central for what takes place at the table. Week by week by word and action we rehearse the foundational events that provided our salvation. We claim a share in them and pledge anew our fidelity to the way of the Lord. We come to the feast because, if we do not, our memory is dimmed and we are in danger of losing the only One who matters.

Contributors

Everett Ferguson is Professor Emeritus of Church History at Abilene Christian University.

Allan J. McNicol is A. B. Cox Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology.

Jeffrey Peterson is Associate Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology.

R. Mark Shipp is Pat E. Harrell Associate Professor of Old Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology.

Paul Watson is the pulpit minister of the Cole Mill Road Church of Christ in Durham, North Carolina.

Michael R. Weed is Billy Gunn Hocott Professor of Theology and Ethics at Austin Graduate School of Theology.