

# **CHRISTIAN STUDIES**

Formerly the *Faculty Bulletin* of  
The Institute for Christian Studies

**Number 11:1**

**Fall, 1990**

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*Christian Studies* is a biannual publication of the Institute for Christian Studies and is indexed in *Religion Index One*.

ISSN 1050-4125

The Institute is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to offer the degrees of Bachelor of Biblical Studies and Bachelor of Science in Biblical Studies.

The Institute for Christian Studies  
1909 University Avenue  
Austin, Texas 78705

Institute for Christian Studies CHRISTIAN STUDIES Number 11:1 Fall, 1990 ©
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# The Lord's Supper As Hermeneutical Clue: A Proposal on Theological Method for Churches of Christ <sup>1</sup>

*Allan McNicol*

If Churches of Christ have been serious about any theological area it is the interpretation of the Bible. From the time of the Campbells we assumed that all reasonable unprejudiced people could read the Bible alike and come to common agreement about its teachings. This emphasis on the perspecuity of Scripture continues to serve as an essential presupposition to evangelism, preaching, and teaching throughout the church.

Yet it cannot be denied that our debates over the interpretation of texts often appear to have a stale and lifeless quality about them. Some modes of interpretation, immensely influential among us in the past, still have their partisans. We maintain a legacy of great respect for the Bible that is no longer present in many of the old-line denominations. But it is also true that many have lost confidence in accomplishing anything significant in our adult Bible classes. The old methods of Bible study seldom function as a vital part of church life.

Thus the impression is often left that it is the failure to have an adequate method for interpreting Scripture that has led to our current theological malaise. But, in my view, it is not how we go about studying the Bible (hermeneutics), but *theological method* that stands at the root of our problems. The truth is that neither the old hermeneutical methods of the nineteenth century nor the work of either Historical/Contextual exegesis or Biblical Theology (as a mere descriptive discipline) can distill from the texts of the Bible a comprehensive archetype for Christian dogma as our blueprint model has demanded. Indeed, given the occasional and contextual situation that surrounded the production of many of the books of the Bible, it is clear that most of our hermeneutical models ask more of the texts than they are capable of delivering.

As a product of the Reformation we are too deeply into *sola scriptura* ever to question whether our theological proposals must be warranted by the text. But this does not mean that we should accept a model of Scripture as a set of propositions that function as a master code or blueprint to furnish all answers to our theological questions. We need some clarification about how we justify Christian teaching and what is the precise function of the Bible in this process.

Thus a fundamental question for us is to determine what we consider to be ultimately authoritative about the Christian Faith and what is the role of Scripture in mediating that normative claim. I presume the answer to the former question is the Gospel of Christ.

### **An Alternative Model for Construing the Importance of Scripture**

At the heart of the witness of Churches of Christ is a concern to be obedient to the Gospel, to preach it, and maintain its authority in the life of the church. Linked with this concern is the presupposition that the Gospel may be identified and maintained in purity if we follow the basic precepts and precedents of the early apostolic church described in the New Testament. It has been our constant belief that when we do this we can be "the primitive church restored." This is the basis of our claim to be a legitimate Christian fellowship.

Emerging out of the world of the ancient people of God, reconstituted by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we believe that the active grace of God was shown to humankind in a paradigmatic way. At the heart of our position is the claim that this same grace of God is available to us today when we proclaim this one Gospel and obey its ordinances.<sup>2</sup> Gospel and ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper) are ineluctably linked because they are centered in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. The heart and soul of our faith rests in this center. It constitutes our basic warrant and discrimen for making theological judgments.

Scripture is important because it gives us a window to view the apostolic faith. It makes available to the contemporary church the narrative Story of the ancient people of God which culminated in the emergence of the Gospel. But we must remember that our basic authority is in the truth of the Gospel. It does not rest in some scheme or metaphysical construal of texts as many hermeneutical

methodologies often presuppose. We must shift our view of the nature of the hermeneutical task for the church. The task is not to find an inerrant blueprint of all dogma in Scripture. But, acting on the basis of a theological center in the Gospel and ordinances, which God has provided as the link to the impact of Jesus and as channels of grace for the spiritual growth of the community, we should be concerned to construct our theology and develop our communal life in conformity with that center.

### **An Observation and Proposal**

It may be helpful to look at how this proposal works out in practice using one of the ordinances: the Lord's Supper. There appears to be a schizophrenia among us regarding the function of the ordinances. There is widespread unanimity and agreement about belief and practice regarding baptism. Baptism is the rite demanded of believers which effects entrance into Christ for the remission of sins. In the action of the rite itself the believer, in close identification with the power and grace coming from the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, claims the apostolic promise to pass from death to life. We believe baptism must be an action that imitates as closely as possible the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Correct action and the reception of God's grace are inseparable.

With the Lord's Supper, however, the situation among us is often the opposite. Our practice is to speak of it as a memorial. But, beyond that, there is widespread divergence of views as to its meaning. There is little attempt to highlight the symbolism of the loaf and the cup. The practice of breaking the loaf in connection with the prayer of thanks at the table, an important liturgical act for early Restorationists, has been abandoned. No pouring from a cup takes place at the table. In other words, our observance of the Lord's Supper only vaguely approximates what took place in the ancient church.

Since obedient response to the Gospel by observance of the ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper) stands at the center of our identity as a people, I suggest that we should have a clear and consistent view of what both these ordinances denote. We affirm that in baptism the believer is brought by the Spirit into conscious identification with Jesus' death and is conveyed the benefits of his perfect sacrifice.

Consistent with this understanding of baptism, I suggest the Lord's Supper represents the death of Jesus and that the believer actively participates in its spiritual benefits. Thus, both baptism and the Lord's Supper function as vehicles of the grace of God, and their proper observance is fundamental for the nourishment of the community, and is essential to its salvation.

This proposal is theologically warranted on three grounds: (1) Scripture (the idea is in accord with the apostolic Gospel and Story); (2) Tradition (i.e., it is the considered view of key and significant figures in the Restoration Movement); (3) Ecumenical Teaching (this view has had broad acceptance as representing apostolic belief and practice throughout historic Christianity).<sup>3</sup>

Such a method of "doing theology" may come as a surprise to some, but it has advantages. It frees us from a restrictive view of Scripture which cannot bear the weight we place upon it. It also allows us to be more "catholic" thus freeing the church from the grip of idiosyncratic views. Indeed, before we bind our theological proposals on the church we need to ask whether our theological proposals comport with the apostolic Gospel and its exposition. Are they "scriptural"?; are they congruent with the broad stream of the Restoration Movement?; and, are they in continuity with historic Christianity?

Procedurally, the rest of this essay will be concerned with working out the proposal. Thus we assert that Scripture, the (Restoration) Tradition, and significant segments of historical Christianity have understood the Lord's Supper to be a meal where, by God's grace, the crucified Lord is spiritually present and as our high priest mediates God's presence toward us in a special way.

## **The Origin and Function of the Lord's Supper**

### *Origin of the Supper*

We know from Acts 2:42 and 20:7-11 that there existed at certain meals among the earliest Christians a rite that contributed in a special way to their unique identity of these believers. The precise origin and form of this rite is shrouded in mystery and remains the subject of fierce debate among the scholars.<sup>4</sup> Unquestionably, however, by the time the New Testament books were written, the rite was closely tied to the death of Jesus. The Gospels

indicate that Jesus began the day (Hebrew time) that he was crucified by eating a meal with his disciples where bread was broken and wine was poured.<sup>5</sup> This connection between the action at the last meal and Jesus' death has provided the key for interpreting the Lord's Supper from the first century until this time.

All three major source accounts in the New Testament (Matthew/Mark; Luke, Paul) testify to this connection.

In Matthew 26:26-29 (Mk. 14:22-25), while Jesus and his disciples were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and distributed it to his disciples with the injunction, "Take, eat, this is my body!" On the same day that Jesus intentionally broke bread and referred to it as his body, his body was nailed to the cross! The connection between Jesus' action at the meal and his death is unmistakable. Likewise, the cup. In Matthew the cup is taken, and after thanks, the disciples are invited to share it with the words, "You all drink from it," with the additional statement that this is the blood of the covenant (Jer. 31:34) reminiscent of the covenant sealed with blood by Moses (Ex. 24:6-8) to be poured out for many (Is. 53:7-12) for the forgiveness of sins. Mark has essentially the same account without the reference to the forgiveness of sins.

The account in Luke has difficulties because it is replete with textual and compositional problems.<sup>6</sup> Even if we take the account of the Western text (22:15-19a) as a basis for analysis, the theme of suffering is present (22:15). This is supplemented in the sayings in 22:19b-20 which appear to be a conflation between Matthew and Paul emphasizing, in the words of institution, a close connection with the death of Jesus.

When we come to Paul (1 Cor. 11:23-24), there is stated the command to observe the rite "in order to make remembrance of me." The statement over the broken bread is that it is the body of Christ broken for you. Again Isaiah 53:11-12 appears to be in the background, the bread saying is specifically connected with Jesus' death.

Similarly, the saying that the cup is the new covenant in my blood is an absolutely unequivocal statement that the death of Jesus inaugurates a new agreement between God and his people. From the time of the earliest accounts, the observance of the Lord's Supper has been tied closely to the events and significance of the Passion of Jesus.

This must be the foundation upon which any understanding of the Lord's Supper is based.

### *The Lord's Supper as Hermeneutic*

Two passages in Paul comprise the earliest direct commentary on the meaning of the Supper (1 Cor. 10:16-17; 11:26-32). These passages are examples of how the tradition about the death of Jesus, incorporated into the liturgical accounts of the Supper, is used by Paul to solve theological problems in the Corinthian church. This becomes a textbook lesson in hermeneutics as Paul takes sacred tradition and applies it to a new situation.

In 1 Corinthians 10:16-22 the issue is the incompatibility between Christian participation in the Lord's Supper and pagan idol feasts. Paul did not believe the gods had any real existence. Behind the nothingness of the idols, however stood demons with real power. A Christian who participated in the cultic feast at Corinth was in danger of being in communication with a pagan altar.<sup>7</sup> This action was mutually incompatible with the Lordship of Christ (1 Cor. 14:21).

When the Corinthians gathered at the Supper (as did the apostles on the eve of the crucifixion), Christ's death was vividly represented before them in rite — and the believers entered into a common participation (*koinōnia*) with his activity. This participation was to be a fellowship of sufferings (Rom. 8:17). To have communion with Christ was to pledge allegiance to his way in the world.

But, in 1 Corinthians 10:17, Paul needed to make the practical interpretation of this truth for his concrete situation. Though diverse, they had unity because of their joint participation in the one (broken) loaf. With this common solidarity and dependence upon Jesus, the believers at Corinth pledged exclusive allegiance to their Lord having nothing to do with the pagan cultic feasts. Here the interpretation of the Lord's Supper had direct implications for the ethical life.

In 1 Corinthians 11:26-32 we have a second interpretation of the Supper set forth. Again Paul takes an early tradition about the Lord's Supper and uses it to solve a practical problem of divisions in the church at Corinth.

The issues of allegiance and solidarity present in 1 Corinthians 10 resurface in a different way. At the assembly in the members'

homes there appeared to be a strong spirit of individualism and lack of concern for other believers during the traditional meal or "love feast." Paul was concerned that the disunity at the traditional meal threatened the unity and solidarity that was typified by the Supper that followed. The assembly at Corinth was contradictory; the Supper presumed theological unity, while the "love feast" testified to practical disunity.

Paul responds by rehearsing the tradition about the Supper (1 Cor. 11:23-25). The re-presentation of the death of Christ in the Supper is a concrete proclamation of the death of the Lord. For Paul, the death of Jesus was the culmination of a life of commitment, not to his own concerns, but the concerns of others. For the Supper to be celebrated genuinely, the same commitment to others should be manifest among the Corinthians when they break the loaf and drink the cup. Theology and ethics are one at the table.

The phrase "not discerning the body" (11:29), has produced considerable comment.<sup>8</sup> Some argue that Paul's "body" refers to the church, focusing attention on the edification of the brethren rather than on the sacrifice of Christ. But because of the reference in 11:27 to the body of the Lord (as Jesus re-presented in his death at the table) this use must govern the interpretation of 11:29. Nonetheless, when Christ is perceived correctly in the Supper, it follows that there is a demand to show care for others.

This misunderstanding of the Supper has resulted in sickness and moral failure in the life of the congregation (1 Cor. 11:30f.). Practically speaking, in order to overcome their divisions, the Corinthians were urged to eat at home (1 Cor. 11:34). Above all, they were to see that what takes place at the Lord's Supper is closely connected with a self-consistent conduct at the assembly. Proper understanding of the Lord's Supper functions as a criterion for ethical living.

Summarizing to this point, the Lord's Supper was central to the early church. At the Lord's Table the death of Jesus was concretely re-presented in liturgical action and believers through their participation shared its benefits. Paul could refer to its meaning as a basis for dealing with practical problems in the churches. We should do likewise today.

But this can only be credible when the liturgical action of the

Supper (just as in baptism) is carried out in a careful, consistent way. The death of Jesus must be vividly re-presented each time we are at the table. The Supper must be conducted so that we perceive the life of the community from this center.

Unfortunately, many Churches of Christ today approximate the situation described in 1 Corinthians 11:29. We do not discern the body when the words and actions at the table bear faint resemblance to the ancient rite. We must foster respect for the apostolic tradition about the Supper and be prepared to correct our practices.

### **Restoration Views of the Lord's Supper**

The strong connection between Gospel and ordinances has historically been a central point in the Campbell-Stone movement. Unlike Lutherans, Episcopalians, or Presbyterians, Churches of Christ do not appeal to historical confessions to warrant their theological practice. This is due to the emphasis on the practices of the primitive church, and the early Restorationist reaction to the evils of sectarian creeds and confessions. Nevertheless, from the outset, members of the Campbell-Stone movement have published statements that present the main views of the movement. We will now examine several statements on the Lord's Supper set forth by three of the most prominent theologians of the Restoration Movement.

#### *Alexander Campbell and The Christian System*

Campbell introduces his discussion on the Supper with the heading, "Breaking the Loaf." It is important to Campbell that there is one loaf. He notes Paul's view that "because there is one loaf we must consider the whole congregation as one body."<sup>9</sup> He argues that what Paul was doing was reasoning from what is more plain to what is less plain. There was no dispute that there was one loaf on the table. Therefore there should be no dispute about the oneness of the body.<sup>10</sup> Campbell argues strongly that the liturgical action of breaking the loaf by the one presiding at the table re-presents the Lord's death. This point is driven home with this comment:

Upon the loaf and upon the cup of the Lord in letters which speak not to the eye but to the heart of every disciple is inscribed "*When this you see remember me.*" . . . The loaf is thus constituted a representation of his body—first whole, then wounded for our sins. The cup is thus instituted a

representation of his blood — once his life, but now poured out to cleanse us from our sins.<sup>11</sup>

For Campbell, the ordinances are valid only if we follow closely the liturgical practice set forth in the Scriptures.

*William Robinson: A Twentieth-Century British View*

The name of William Robinson is not well known among American Churches of Christ. However, as a member of the Associated Churches of Christ in Great Britain, he wrote about the ordinances.<sup>12</sup> Robinson is significant because, as a lone voice, he continued to theologize within the context of the Campbell-Stone movement in healthy dialogue with the wider ecumenical community of Europe.

Almost fifty years ago his article, "Sacramental Theory," revived some of the key Campbellian ideas on the importance of the Lord's Supper. Robinson stressed that Christianity was based on certain redemptive acts. Records of these are found in the Gospels or in summary form in such passages as 1 Corinthians 15:3-5. Liturgical rites re-present and mediate those acts to the believing community. Indeed, Robinson claims, it is the function of liturgical action to represent the whole life of Christ before worshippers.<sup>13</sup>

The role of baptism and the Supper in worship is crucial. The action and performance of baptism makes effective the power of Christ's death, burial and resurrection for the believer. It is not mere recollection of a past event but co-experience with this sacred action here and now.<sup>14</sup> To tamper with its action or symbolism is to endanger the power of baptism to witness to the Christian Gospel.

Likewise in the liturgical action of the Supper, Christ is visibly depicted as crucified. Only through appropriate observance of this ritual does the royal priesthood offer its true sacrifice. In so doing, we offer ourselves to God (not on a basis of our determination or preference) through our great High Priest who is spiritually with us.<sup>15</sup> Again, to tamper with the liturgical action damages the connection between sacred acts and redemptive appropriation.

*Everett Ferguson: A Twentieth-Century American View*

In several of his published works Everett Ferguson has emphasized the great importance of the Lord's Supper for the church. He has

argued that central to the Supper are the themes of thanksgiving, memorial action, fellowship, and eschatological hope.<sup>16</sup>

Ferguson stresses the importance of thanksgiving at early Christian celebrations of the Supper. Analogous to the prayer of thanks at meals—celebrated from time immemorial among the people of God—the expression of thanksgiving and praise to God for his bountiful gifts, says Ferguson, was a central activity at the table.<sup>17</sup> Unique about this celebration is the applied use of the familiar gestures done at each meal to the loaf and the cup. The prayers of thanksgiving for the bread and the cup attest to our special sense of thanksgiving for the salvific acts of Christ.<sup>18</sup> Thus, for Ferguson, the symbolic presence of the cup and the loaf and the prayers at the table are crucial for the life of the church.

Ferguson affirms the usual scholarly view that “remembrance” is not mere anniversary or emblem, but a re-enactment which causes remembrance of a past event. He likens the action of Jesus at the Last Supper to a prophetic sign-act.

Since the symbol partakes of the reality being enacted, when we repeat the action of Jesus, we bring the benefits of his death once more into our lives. We participate in his sacrifice (1 Cor. 10:16).<sup>19</sup>

Here Ferguson echoes the view that the ordinances are a means whereby we participate in the benefits of the death and resurrection of Christ. However, he makes no reference to the importance of the symbolism and liturgical action of the one loaf broken and cup poured at the table. As with the work of Campbell and Robinson, Ferguson does not offer a total systematic statement on the supper. His lack of emphasis on the importance of liturgical action at the Supper is consistent with current practice in Churches of Christ.

### Summary

An early Restoration leader, Walter Scott, once made this statement about the ordinances.

What, then are baptism and the Lord’s Supper? I answer that they are the crucifixion, or death, burial and resurrection of Christ repeating themselves in the life and profession of the disciples, and proclaiming to the ages that he,

that was to come, is come. In participating in these ordinances, the disciples on their part declare that through faith in his name they are before all men dead and buried to sin, and alive unto righteousness.<sup>20</sup>

Scott's view is warranted by the Scriptures, and has also been central to the theology of the Restoration Movement.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Witness of the Wider Ecumenical Community**

A third basis for warranting a theological proposal is whether the proposal has had credible acceptance in the history of Christianity.

The value of this warrant is primarily a negative one. There are important views on the ordinances in major segments of Christendom that are not warranted by accounts in Scripture and are not congruent with Restoration Theology. Restorationists consistently have argued that the theological positions which they hold are foundational for the unity of all believers. This means that they should have widespread acceptance as to their plausibility.

The Campbell-Stone movement has close theological ties with the Reformed Tradition, one of the most significant segments of Christianity in the West. In this connection, the historical issue is whether we should decide in favor of Zwingli or Calvin.

The debate between the followers of Zwingli and Calvin turned on the issue whether God's spiritual offer of salvation could be experienced through the means of a sense-based act. The Reformed position held that Jesus Christ comes to the faithful believer in the Supper and conveys the benefits of salvation. Zwingli did not agree. He argued that the Holy Spirit needs no material vehicle. If grace were usually conveyed through the ordinances the clergy, who controlled the ordinances, would control salvation. He said the Lord's Supper should be observed as a devotional act of thanksgiving for the benefits of the Gospel already received, not as an offer of salvation from Christ.<sup>22</sup>

To be sure, there are elements in the Zwinglian emphasis that make their way into the regular religious life of Churches of Christ. Our stress on the Lord's Supper as memorial is a case in point. But

our earlier analysis has shown that we also draw heavily on the thought of Calvin. Certainly this was the position of Campbell. As Ferguson has noted, when we are at the table "we bring the benefits of his death once more into our lives."<sup>23</sup> This is not only congruent with a certain Reformed position; it comports with much historic Christianity in both East and West. At the table, we commune spiritually with the risen Lord.

## Conclusion

There is basic confusion today as to how the Churches of Christ should read the Bible. We may be studying the Bible more (although in places that can be disputed), but we certainly appear to be enjoying it less. The tendency is to criticize what has been done in the past and look for new hermeneutical models to read Scripture.

Our problem goes far deeper than disputes over the interpretation of texts. It centers in whether our fellowship has a distinct theological identity. I believe that we do. The heart of our identity is our belief in the absolute authority of the Gospel, and that its benefits are mediated through the observance of the ordinances of believer's baptism and the Lord's Supper. This provides the vital center for all of our theology and ethics.

In this paper we have concentrated on one aspect of that center the Lord's Supper. When we read the Bible in the light of this discussion we can overcome the tendency to read it merely as a body of facts or a blueprint. Thus we may do what believers have always done; read the text in such a way that the mystery and wonder of God's faithfulness overcomes and transforms us.

## NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Christian Scholars Conference at Pepperdine University, July 1988.

2. James O. Duke, "The Disciples and the Lord's Supper," *Encounter* 50/1 (Winter, 1989) 4, has forcefully argued that for Campbell, "A Restoration of the ordinances of the new institution to their place and power," was the distinguishing mark of the new Reformation. We totally agree.

3. This is my version of the three-fold warranting of theological claims in Anglicanism (Scripture; Tradition — the Fathers and decisions of the Ecumenical Councils; and Reason). cf. *The Study of Anglicanism*, eds.,

Stephen Sykes and John Booty (London: SPCK/Fortress, 1988) 79-117. The Methodists use a four-fold arrangement: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. Other major confessional groups have their own versions of the warrants.

4. Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread: The Witness of the New Testament* (New York: Paulist, 1982 original French edition) 311-321, 336, 339 gives adequate reference to the major contributions of Lietzmann, Schurmann, and Jeremias on this point.

5. C. H. Dodd, "The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper," *Christian Worship: Studies in its History and Meaning*, ed., Nathaniel Micklem (Oxford: Clarendon, 1936) 74.

6. It is my view that Dodd, "Sacrament," 70 is correct when he says that the Synoptic and Pauline accounts already reflected the actual liturgical practice in various geographical regions of the ancient church. In the case of Luke, we may have here evidence for several different liturgical remembrances of the rite — if the manuscript evidence is any barometer.

7. Leon-Dufour, *Eucharistic Bread*, 208. He notes that behind this repulsion by Paul is probably the influence of Deuteronomy 32:15,17, 21, 38.

8. Leander Keck, *Paul and His Letters*, 2nd edition Revised and Enlarged (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 62.

9. Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (Cincinnati: Standard., 2nd edition, 1839) 305.

10. Campbell.

11. Campbell, 309-310. Here Campbell states well that the one presiding should break the loaf "not as the representative of the Lord but after his example."

12. William Robinson, *What Churches of Christ Stand For* (Birmingham: The Berean Press, 1946) 82-91; also, "The View," 253-268; "The Nature and Character of Christian Sacramental Theory and Practice," *The Shane Quarterly* 2/4 (October 1941) 399-408.

13. Robinson, "Sacramental Theory," 402-407.

14. "Sacramental Theory."

15. "Sacramental Theory."

16. Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak* (Austin: Sweet Publishing, 1971) 109.

17. Ferguson, *Early Christians*, 96-103.

18. Ferguson, *New Testament Church*, (Abilene: Biblical Research Press, 1968) 61.

19. *New Testament Church*, 62.
20. Walter Scott, *The Messiahship or Great Demonstration written for the Union of Christians, on Christian Principles, as Pleaded for in the Current Reformation* (Kansas City: Old Paths Book Club Reproduction, first published 1859) 284.
21. Note the article by Bonnie Thurston, "‘DO THIS’: A Study on the Institution of the Lord’s Supper," *Restoration Quarterly* 30/4 (1988) 207-217; although not directly addressing the practical situation in American churches of Christ, she rightfully stresses the importance of liturgical action in a Scriptural observance of the Lord’s Supper.
22. Clark Williamson, "The Lord’s Supper: A Systematic Theological View," *Encounter* 50/1 (1989) 62.
23. Ferguson, *New Testament Church*, 61.



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