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Lord's Supper and Love Feast

Everett Ferguson

I begin with the accounts of the institution of the Lord's supper, so that this material is fresh in our minds. The earliest written account is by Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:23–25:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

This was written within about twenty-five years after Jesus' last supper with his disciples. Already there was a fixed account of what was relevant for the practice of the church that was being handed down. Paul says it came from the Lord himself and was transmitted through others to him, and he delivered it to the churches. The tradition identifies the setting when this occurred as "supper," but otherwise there was nothing about the meal in the account that was passed on to the churches, and no significance was attached to it.

[Jesus] took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, say-

ing, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:14–20).

This account is similar to Paul's with the difference that Luke gives more of the meal setting. This is particularly evident in Luke's mention, according to the long text, of a cup at the beginning as well as at the end of the meal. Rabbinic descriptions of the Passover meal mention four times during the meal when a cup of wine was passed around. Luke probably does not represent an alternative order of observing the cup before the bread, but gives a fuller account of events at the meal in order to preserve the saying connecting the events to the kingdom of God. Otherwise, the interpretation of the first cup is given no significance for future observance. It is the bread and the cup after the supper that are given a new meaning.

Mark's account preserves a different tradition about the last supper, but agrees in essentials with the accounts in Paul and Luke. Mark 14:22–24 reads:

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take, this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Mark and Matthew make nothing of the meal setting, except to mention it as the occasion when Jesus gave a special meaning to the bread and the cup. They focus attention on what was important for the continuing practice of the church.

In all the accounts the bread is associated with the body of Christ, Paul and Luke adding that this body was (given) for you. The accounts vary in the meaning given to the cup, but the explanations converge. Paul and

Luke identify the cup with the new covenant that is in the blood of Jesus; whereas Mark and Matthew say the cup is the blood of the covenant, with Matthew elaborating that the blood brought forgiveness of sins (which was the heart of the meaning of the new covenant). Thus the accounts point to Jesus' death and its atoning significance that establishes a new relationship (or covenant) between God and human beings. Paul and Luke explain that the significance of repeating what Jesus did and said at the last supper is to make a memorial or a remembrance of the redemptive act and its consequences.

It is true that references to the Lord's supper in the New Testament continue to refer to the context of a meal, which was the setting when the remembrance of the death of Jesus was instituted. A meal was the occasion for the abuses at Corinth that Paul had to correct: 1 Corinthians 11:21, "When the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk."

The same setting applies to the meeting at Troas in Acts 20:7–11.

On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them" (v 7). Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them (v 11).

Here, a word of explanation is in order with reference to the phrase, "break bread." It did not mean "to eat a meal," but rather referred to the action that preceded the meal. It was a specific action that was part of the ordinary way to begin a Jewish meal. The host took the bread in his hands, said a prayer of thanks (a blessing), broke the bread, and gave it to the persons at table. In doing this, Jesus was doing nothing different from what was customary. (Note the description in the accounts of Jesus' feeding miracles: Jesus "blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to his disciples to set

before the people” [Mark 6:41, 8:6, and parallels], wording that was probably preserved because of the actions at the last supper and the continuing observance in the churches.) What was new was not what Jesus did but the significance he gave to the familiar action as a representation of his body given for others. The phrase, “break bread,” referring to a general custom, could refer to beginning a meal or to the specific remembrance of the death of Jesus. The context must decide which is meant in each case, and that is not always conclusive. Breaking bread precedes an ordinary meal in Acts 27:33–36, when Paul eats with the people on the ship carrying him to Rome. The same may be true for Acts 20:11, as distinct from verse 7. Acts 2:46 is ambiguous, occurring so close to 2:42, where a church act is indicated, but seemingly referring to regular meals at home. The possibility that verse 46 is the Lord’s supper has led to the speculation of a daily Lord’s supper in the early church, but the phrase for “daily” is construed grammatically with the meetings in the temple and not necessarily with the breaking of bread at home. And in either case the act is not necessarily the Lord’s supper.

The Lord’s supper and the meal sometimes accompanying it had a different significance from the beginning. Hence, they are separable in time and place. Only to the Lord’s supper is a special significance given in the New Testament—the representation and remembrance of the body and blood of Jesus.

The restoration of New Testament faith and practice does not include the restoration of historical context, social setting, cultural setting, or the like. For instance, the accounts of the Lord’s supper place its institution and observance in an upper room. Mark 14:15 identifies the place of the last supper as a “large room upstairs.” The events of Acts 20:7ff occurred in a “room upstairs” (v 8), indeed on the third floor (v 9). There have been those (such

as the Sandemanians) who thought that following apostolic example required taking communion in an upstairs room. But there is no historical evidence supporting the idea that this was normal practice, and no doctrinal meaning is given in the New Testament to the place of observance. As a parallel, we may note that where information is given on baptisms in the New Testament, they occurred in natural bodies of water—the Jordan River (Mark 1:5) or springs or pools (John 3:23; Acts 8:36). But no theological significance is given to the water of baptism, unlike in the *Didache* 7, where importance is attached to “living” or running water. Nor is any theological significance given in the New Testament to the meal. Of course, one can baptize in a natural body of water, can take the Lord's supper in an upper room, or have a meal in close proximity to it. But the point is that those things are not part of the apostolic instructions or apostolic precedent for the continuing practice of the churches.

At some point the Lord's supper and the meal were separated in time of observance. I think that occurred quite early. Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians may have been the occasion. The tradition that he passes on and the accounts of the institution in Matthew and Mark seem to reflect an observance apart from a meal context.

A special problem of interpretation attaches to the *Didache* chapters 9–10. The *Didache* is commonly dated to the end of the first or beginning of the second century. Its instructions about the Lord's supper seem to me to come from a Jewish-Christian community and to preserve practices that could be quite early. They are quite unlike what we know from any other source. The text as we now have it begins this way:

Concerning the eucharist [meaning “thanksgiving” and the common second-century name for what we call the Lord's supper], give thanks in this

way: first concerning the cup. [There follows a short prayer.] Concerning the broken bread, [followed by a longer prayer]. No one is to eat or drink of your eucharist except those who have been baptized in the name of the Lord. . . . After you are filled, give thanks in this way. . . . [After a long prayer, the text says] . . . Allow the prophets to give thanks as they wish. (*Didache* 9–10)

Some have understood the whole account to refer to the eucharist; others understand it as a love feast. I rather think we have both included and so a situation where the Lord's supper was part of a meal setting.¹

The report that the Roman governor of Bithynia, Pliny, sent to the Emperor Trajan at the beginning of the second century may reflect a separation of the meal from the Lord's supper.

[The Christians] affirmed that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds . . . ; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind. Even this practice, however, they had abandoned after the publication of my edict. (*Letters*, 108:46)

Pliny's sources of information were apostates from Christianity from several years earlier; he may not fully or accurately report what he was told; and he may not have understood what he was told; so we have to be cautioned about putting too much credence in his report. Where the Lord's supper fits into his information is not completely clear, but it probably belongs in the morning meeting, for it may be reflected in Pliny's word for an "oath" and it seems unlikely that Christians would have abandoned the Lord's supper as readily as they did a common meal together.

¹To explore the interpretive options further would take us away from the main concerns of this presentation, but for a fuller discussion of this point see my *Early Christians Speak* (3rd ed.; Abilene: ACU Press, 1999), text on 91–92 and commentary on 95–98.

The first full and orderly account of Christian assemblies that we have comes from Justin Martyr's *First Apology* 67, dated about 150. Justin's word for what we call the Lord's supper is "eucharist." He includes the bread and cup as part of this service, but he says nothing about a meal as part of the assembly. Justin had earlier in the *First Apology* summarized the Gospel narratives of the institution, recalling Jesus' words about the bread, "Do this for my memorial; this is my body" and about the cup, "This is my blood" (*I Apology* 66). In another work Justin spoke of the eucharist as "a memorial of the passion which our Lord Jesus Christ suffered on behalf of the people who are being purified in their souls from all evil" (*Dialogue with Trypho* 41).

I say that Justin gives the first intentional account of Christian assemblies, but it may be noted that Justin's four items—scripture reading and preaching, prayer, bread and cup, and contribution—are remarkably close, although in a different order, to Acts 2:42—the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers.

We have another early account of the eucharist in the *Apostolic Tradition* 4, attributed to Hippolytus of Rome from the early third century. The *Apostolic Tradition* is a community document with layers of material included; hence, as it has been reconstructed from documents derived from it, there is some later material as well as some that may be quite early. The prayer of thanksgiving for the bread and cup includes the statement, "Remembering therefore his death and resurrection we offer to you the bread and the cup giving thanks to you" (*Apostolic Tradition* 4).² The second-century texts, therefore, as would be expected, connect the eucharist or Lord's supper with the passion and resurrection of Jesus.

² This text is in my *Early Christians Speak*, 92–93.

Quite different is what is said about the love feast. The love feast, or *agape*, is mentioned for certain only once in the New Testament—Jude 12, “These are blemishes on your love feasts.” The teachings and conduct of certain persons discredited the love feasts, even as our later sources show these meals to have been occasions of unruly conduct that had to be closely supervised by church authorities. The parallel text of 2 Peter 2:13, “They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their dissipation while they feast with you,” in some manuscripts reads “love feasts” instead of “dissipation.”

Apart from such bare mention, the love feast is known from three sources near the year 200. The earliest, Clement of Alexandria, rebukes those interested only in the meal and those “who expect to buy the promise of God” by providing dinners for others. The word for “love feast” was the word “love,” and Clement wants to direct attention to the spiritual reality of love. “The meal occurs because of love, not love because of the meal, which is a proof of a generous and shared good will” (*Instructor* 2.4.3–4; 2.6.1–7.1).

Tertullian gives an orderly account of the proceedings:

Our feast shows its motive by its name. It is called by the Greek word for love [*agape*]. Whatever is reckoned the cost, money spent in the name of piety is gain, since with that refreshment we benefit the needy. We do not recline at the table before prayer to God is first tasted. We eat the amount that satisfies the hungry; we drink as much as is beneficial to the modest. We satisfy ourselves as those who remember that even during the night we must worship God; we converse as those who know that the Lord listens. After the washing of hands and lighting of lamps, each one who is able is called into the center to chant praise to God either from the holy Scriptures or from his own talents. This is a proof of how much is drunk. Prayer in like manner concludes the meal. (*Apology* 39.16–18)

This is the only text before the fourth-century monastic movement to speak of solos in Christian meetings, and this is in the context of the love feast, not the other assemblies.

Documents dependent on the *Apostolic Tradition* give the most

detailed regulations. The meal was provided by a person of means; a bishop, presbyter, or deacon presided; widows especially were to be invited; the bread and cup are carefully distinguished from the eucharist; there was to be no disorderly conduct or loud talking (25–27).³

These accounts show the love feast as distinct from the eucharist or Lord's supper. It was primarily an expression of charity and an occasion of fellowship. It had a separate development from the Lord's supper and served a different purpose, but it was likely derived from or a continuation of the common meals of the early disciples.

An association in origin of the love feast with the Lord's supper is shown by a certain fluidity in the terminology. Thus the *Apostolic Tradition* calls the love feast a "Lord's supper" (27.1); love feast can refer to the eucharist (or at least include it—*Epistle of the Apostles* 15); and Ignatius closely associated the eucharist and the love feast (*Smyrnaeans* 8). The Lord's supper and the love feast were two distinct activities—the one a remembrance and proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the other an act of benevolence and fellowship. It took some time before a distinct and fixed terminology prevailed, even as some time passed before the functions were separated in time, but the activities themselves had discreet meanings from the beginning.

One difference between the love feast and the Lord's supper is that the love feast could be celebrated on any day, whereas the Lord's supper was closely connected with Sunday. Two linguistic points make the latter association. The Greek adjective "Lord's (*kuriakon*), lordly, of or pertaining to the

³*Early Christians Speak*, 125–127.

Lord,” occurs twice in the New Testament: once in reference to the Lord’s supper (1 Cor 11:20) and once in reference to the Lord’s day (Rev 1:10).

Paul’s use of “Lord” in 1 Corinthians points to the significance of his term, “Lord’s supper.” As there is one God, so there is “one Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 8:6). What is done in the breaking of bread and drinking the fruit of the vine goes back to what the “Lord Jesus” did on the night of his betrayal (1 Cor 11:23). What makes the “supper” distinctly the Lord’s is that it is done as a memorial to him, as we read from 1 Corinthians 11:24 and 25. The cup is a communion or participation in the blood of Christ and the bread is a communion or participation in the body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16). Hence, it is the “cup of the Lord” and the “table of the Lord” (1 Cor 10:21). What Jesus did for human salvation made him Lord.

What makes a particular day the “Lord’s day” is that on that day he was raised from the dead. The resurrection meant his crowning as king (Acts 2:30–31) with all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18) and exaltation over all rule, authority, and power as “head over the church” (Eph 1:20–22). The resurrection made him “Lord.” Hence the day of the resurrection is peculiarly “his.” The designation of the supper and the day by the same adjective as being the “Lord’s” and only these two things, ties the two inseparably together.

Another linguistic connection is to be noted. The phrase “first day of the week” occurs in the New Testament in two contexts—as the designation of the day of the resurrection and as the day of Christian meeting. All four Gospels have a rare time reference and a rare linguistic agreement among themselves in designating the day of the resurrection as the “first day of the week” (Matt 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). This is the Jewish designation for the day we call Sunday and early Christians called the Lord’s

day. The Jews had a special name for the seventh day, the Sabbath, and for the day before it, the day of preparation. The other five days were simply numbered as “day one, day two,” and so forth between the Sabbaths. Hence, “day one of the Sabbaths” (the literal meaning of the Greek phrase) meant the first day between the Sabbaths or “first day of the week.”

The other setting in which this time designation occurs is in reference to the day of Christian meeting—Acts 20:7 (“On the first day of the week when we met to break bread”) and 1 Corinthians 16:2 (“On the first day of every week each of you is to set aside and put in the treasury from what you earn”). The Gospels make a point of Jesus’ appearances that occurred on the day of the resurrection. Thus Luke puts the appearances on the day of the resurrection. These include the appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, “on that same day” (Luke 24:13), when Jesus “was made known to them in the breaking of bread” (Luke 24:35), to Simon Peter (Luke 24:34), and to the eleven and their companions (Luke 24:33, 36–43). John especially underlines the connection between the day of the resurrection and Jesus’ meeting with his disciples. After recounting the appearance to Mary Magdalene, he repeats the time designation, “When it was evening on that day [that is, the day of the resurrection], the first day of the week,” Jesus appeared to the disciples (John 20:19). Thomas was not present on that occasion. The next appearance recorded by John was one week later, when Thomas was present. “And after eight days his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them” (John 20:26). On the usual method of inclusive counting that eighth day was the next first day of the week, and one form of the Syriac version so translates the verse.

The Gospels, therefore, seem to be anticipating church practice in associating the day of the resurrection with Jesus meeting with his assembled

disciples. It was the resurrection that gave a special day of meeting to Jesus' disciples, different from the Jewish practice of meeting in synagogue on the Sabbath. Of course, believers met on other occasions as well, but this was the day when they broke bread in the special knowledge of the presence of the resurrected Lord in their midst. We remember Jesus' death in the Lord's supper, but we also come together to meet the risen Lord, so we meet on the Lord's day, the day of the resurrection.

The association of the Lord's supper with the Lord's day and the association of the day of the resurrection with the day of meeting should not be weakened or broken by another practice. Nor should the significance of the Lord's supper as a memorial of the death and resurrection of Jesus made by the gathered community of disciples be turned to other purposes. To make the Lord's supper a sacrament that brings a blessing just by doing it says too much about the Lord's supper. To treat it as a general religious act of personal piety so that it can be taken on other occasions than the assembly of the church says too little about the Lord's supper.

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