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Consistent with Protestant churches, Churches of Christ have rejected the five so-called false sacraments and accepted baptism and the Lord's Supper as the proper sacraments of the church. Last year's issue of *Christian Studies* was focused on the theme of baptism. As a follow-up to those reflections, this issue is devoted to the "Eucharist," the early church's favorite word for holy communion. To distinguish it from the self-centered meal that the Corinthian Christians were celebrating, Paul called this meal the Lord's Supper, reminding the church who should be at the center of this practice.

Again, like other Protestant churches, churches of the American Restoration Movement rejected important aspects of the Roman Catholic Church's sacramental theology. As good Protestants, they have taken for granted that communion is to be given in both kinds (bread and cup). Furthermore, with other Protestants, Churches of Christ have rejected transubstantiation.

Where Restorationist churches have generally differed with other Protestants, especially those of Reformed and evangelical backgrounds, is in the frequency of the meal. Traditionally, Restorationist churches have insisted on participating in communion every Lord's Day and only on the Lord's Day. Because this practice has been distinctive among most of their American Protestant neighbors, Restorationist churches have concentrated much of their Eucharistic theology on the question of frequency—specifically, on defending weekly communion against its many detractors. It should be noted that the opponents of weekly communion are now fewer and farther between, since more frequent communion has become the ecumenical consensus. At any rate, as a result of the focus on frequency, other significant questions about the Lord's Supper have often been neglected or pushed aside in Churches of Christ.

Although the question of frequency is certainly important in its own right, this issue of *Christian Studies* intends to address other important issues related to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. What is it? How should we think about it? How should we practice it? How can our theology and practice of the Lord's Supper be improved? The result is a collection of articles that are biblical, historical, theological, and practical. Collectively, they examine a variety of

matters connected to the Eucharist, including related biblical themes, the presence of Christ, historical insights, and the proper communicants.

It is my hope that these articles will be beneficial to you in your own study and reflection on this central rite of the church's life. May the considerations in the following pages help us all be more faithful and thoughtful as we seek to practice and pass on the most holy faith.

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Observing the Lord's Supper Today

Ted A. Campbell

Introduction

My great-grandfather and great-grandmother Campbell were members of the Braxton Church of Christ in Cannon County, Tennessee. After my great-grandfather died in 1906, my great-grandmother moved her three boys to Texas and she raised them in the South Park Church of Christ in Beaumont. A little more than a century later, in March 2011, her United Methodist great-grandson attended the Preston Road Church of Christ in Dallas and there was offered and received the elements of the Lord's Supper. My great-grandma Campbell in heaven can perhaps take some solace in the fact that I am now in communion with at least one Churches of Christ congregation.

I reflected on that experience and noted that the service of the Supper at Preston Road involved an elder of the congregation offering a simple prayer of thanksgiving for the bread and the wine (which tasted a lot like grape juice), then the elements were distributed to the congregation in the pews.¹ It reminded me of the simple prayers over the bread and wine in the second-century *Didache* document,² and I wondered if the distinguished second-century scholar Everett Ferguson had somehow influenced this congregation or its leaders.

But maybe not; maybe it was not just from Professor Ferguson. Part of the genius of the Churches of Christ has been their ability to discern what is at the

¹ Some of the wording of the first two paragraphs of the present article are derived from this blog post: Ted A. Campbell, "Why the Churches of Christ Were Right After All," <https://heartcoremethodist.wordpress.com/2011/03/07/why-the-churches-of-christ-were-right-after-all/>.

² *Didache* 9, in Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 357–59.

crucial center of Christian faith. Their historic reservations about imposing anything (like a piano) not explicitly mentioned in the New Testament has led to some lengthy disputes that other Christians may find baffling or amusing (for example, New Testament precedent for a kitchen in the church building), but it has also led them to think, perhaps in a more focused way than other Christian groups have been forced to think, about what is centrally Christian. And they have consistently discerned the Supper of the Lord at the historic core of Christian faith.

In what follows, I offer some contemporary reflections on observing the Lord's Supper for the broader family of Christians today, and those in Evangelical churches, in particular. In keeping with this, the following reflections are grounded primarily in New Testament texts, but with some reference to early Christian writers and a few later Christian poets and theologians whose works may illuminate the meaning of the Supper. I also offer a proposal as to how we can faithfully observe the Supper in the midst of contemporary worship contexts.

Thinking about the Lord's Supper at the Historic Core of Christian Faith

Let us begin by asking a simple question: Which words of Jesus are the oldest recorded words from him? A strong case can be made that they are the words, not in the canonical gospels, but in two "traditioning" passages in 1 Corinthians 11:23–25 and 15:1–11. The former has to do with what Paul himself called "the supper of the Lord" in 1 Corinthians 11:20. The passage in chapter 15 has to do with the primordial Christian "good news" or "gospel" (*euangelion*), the word used explicitly at 1 Corinthians 15:1. Both passages utilize technical language indicating that they had been orally handed down and received. The words translated "I handed on" (*paredoka*) and "I received" (*parelabon*) that appear in both of these passages (1 Cor 11:23 and 15:3) are terms utilized to designate the solemn handing-on and receiving of oral traditions. In fact, the word *paredoka* is the basis for the Greek word for "tradition" (*paradosis*).³

³ Jerry L. Sumney, *Steward of God's Mysteries: Paul and Early Church Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 137–38 and 159–74. To this we may compare Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), s.v. "ἰδωμι," 2:171–72 (sections on

Most New Testament scholars date 1 Corinthians to the decade of the AD 50s, before the writing of any of the canonical gospels.

New Testament scholar Jerry L. Sumney has examined, in particular, the passage in 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 in a critical new study entitled *Steward of God's Mysteries: Paul and Early Church Tradition*.⁴ Sumney's general concern is to respond to critics who claim that Paul himself “invented” the Christian message. On this reading, these passages about “receiving” and “handing on” or transmitting central elements of the gospel narrative really referred to Paul's claim to have “received” messages directly from God by direct revelation, rather than from the traditions of already-existing Christian communities. Sumney begins by explaining that the verbs “receive” and “hand on” were utilized in the technical sense of handing on and receiving set forms of words.⁵ Here as in other traditioning passages, Sumney points out that the excerpted tradition includes words and phrases unparalleled in other writings of Paul—subtle differences between the accounts of the supper given in Mark's Gospel and in the passage from 1 Corinthians.⁶ This suggests that the two traditions about the Supper had already diverged before the time of Paul and thus again it is unlikely that Paul simply “invented” or received by a direct divine revelation the wording he “handed on” in this crucial passage.⁷

Sumney points to the importance of the Supper not only as linked to the Jewish Passover meal, but also as connected to the common practice of solemn, covenantal banquets in the Hellenistic world.⁸ Liturgical historian Paul F. Bradshaw has made a similar point in his study, *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship*. Bradshaw finds ample evidence in the New Testament that “the regular sharing of food was fundamental to the common life of the first Christian communities, as it apparently had been to Jesus' own mission.”⁹ Bradshaw reads the passage in 1 Corinthians 11 as indicating that the earliest Christian

“παραδοῦναι” and “παράδοσις”). See also Ted A. Campbell, *The Gospel in Christian Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 13–30.

⁴ Sumney, *Steward of God's Mysteries*, 133–58.

⁵ Sumney, *Steward of God's Mysteries*, 137–39.

⁶ Sumney, *Steward of God's Mysteries*, 139–42.

⁷ Sumney, *Steward of God's Mysteries*, 142–45.

⁸ Sumney, *Steward of God's Mysteries*, 148–56.

⁹ Paul F. Bradshaw, *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010; based on the earlier English version published by SPCK in 2009), 18.

communities fed poor people who typically had only bread for their diet, and Paul wanted to address those more affluent Christians who failed to recognize the needs of the poor in the Supper.¹⁰ This occasion led to various ways in which the sacred meal recounting the sufferings and death of Christ came to be separated from actual meals or banquets (sometimes called *agapai*, “love feasts”; Jude 12 and some texts of 2 Peter 2:13, with parallels in other early Christian literature),¹¹ though the latter persisted for centuries in early Christian communities and a relic of it remains in the *antidoron*, the sharing of blessed but unconsecrated bread at the conclusion of the Eastern Orthodox Eucharistic liturgy.¹²

In thinking about the Lord’s Supper today, then, it is important to begin with the recognition that teachings about the sacred meal that Paul called “the Lord’s Supper” were solemnly transmitted among the very earliest words about Jesus Christ and among the most central, consistent actions of the earliest Christian communities. This is consistent with Luke’s description of the core activities of the earliest Christian community in the second chapter of Acts. After Peter preached,

... those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:41–42).¹³

The core activities described here include preaching, baptism, teaching, sharing (*koinonia*, here translated “fellowship”), “the breaking of bread,” and “the prayers.” Consistent with this, “the breaking of bread” in association with “the supper of the Lord” on “the first day of the week” or “the Lord’s day”

¹⁰ Bradshaw, *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship*, 20–23.

¹¹ References to love feasts or Christian banquets in early Christian literature include: Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 8:2 (Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 256–57); and Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 39:16–18, a translation given in James McKinnon, ed., *Music in Early Christian Literature*, Cambridge Readings in the Literature of Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 43 (item 74), and is also referenced in McKinnon’s *The Temple, the Church Fathers, and Early Western Chant* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), essay 8, “On the Question of Psalmody in the Ancient Synagogue,” 95–96.

¹² Timothy [Kallistos] Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1993), 288.

¹³ I have utilized the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) here and in other places unless noted otherwise.

became a consistent weekly practice of Christian communities (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Rev 1:10).¹⁴

Thinking about the Meaning of the Gospel Revealed in the Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper unfolds the mystery of Christ's work on behalf of human beings: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). But it unfolds this mystery in a different way than the public proclamation of the gospel. Consider the public proclamation of Christ by Peter in Jerusalem in Acts 2:14–36 and by Paul in Athens in Acts 17:22–31. Peter's sermon was addressed to "Men of Judea," he referred repeatedly to prophetic utterances of the Hebrew Scriptures (Joel 2:28–32, Psa 16:8–11, 132:11, and 10:1), and he appealed explicitly to Jewish culture in the conclusion of the message: "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36).¹⁵ Paul's sermon in Athens referred to an altar dedicated to "an unknown god," quoted Greek writers, never named Jesus, and referred to him only as "a man whom [God] has appointed" to judge the world and whom God raised from the dead as an assurance (Acts 17:31).

These public messages appealed to very particular cultural contexts and did not elaborate how Christ's work brought about human salvation.¹⁶ Accounts of the Lord's Supper in the New Testament and in early Christian literature, by contrast, set the Supper within a distinctive Christian culture, an encoded language inherited from Judaism as well as Hellenistic sources in which the mystery of Christ's work could be richly unfolded. We can consider

¹⁴ Acts 20:7 ("On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread..."), 1 Cor 16:2 (an indication that collections from the church were received "on the first day of every week"), and Rev 1:10 ("I was in the spirit on the Lord's day ..."), as well as the documented practice of early Christian communities. On the latter, see Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67:1–5, in Dennis Minns and Paul Parvis, trans. ed., *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 258–61.

¹⁵ C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 20–27.

¹⁶ Dodd, *Apostolic Preaching*, 25, makes the point, "The Jerusalem *kerygma* does not assert that Christ died *for our sins*" as Paul's *kerygma* (e.g., 1 Cor 15:1–4) did. But then, neither does the account of Paul's speech in Athens give a rationale for how Christ's work has brought about salvation.

five interpenetrating aspects of the mystery of Christ unfolded in the Supper: feasting and reconciliation, narrative and remembrance, thanksgiving, an atoning offering, and divine presence. In each case, we have to envision ancient contexts that might have been obvious to ancient participants, but which have to be called to mind today to illuminate these aspects of the Supper.¹⁷

Feasting and Reconciliation. The Supper originated with a common meal, although even by the time of Paul, the meal as a banquet was coming to be separated from its meaning as a sacred celebration (1 Cor 11:33, “If you are hungry, eat at home...”). But we should not lose sight of the basic meaning of the Supper as just that: a supper, a shared meal. Liturgiologist Laurence Hull Stookey has made the point that the Lord’s Supper should be understood as connected to the prominent role of food and eating in Jesus’ ministry: “Nothing is more plain from the Gospel accounts than that Jesus loved to eat and drink.”¹⁸

We should also bear in mind that, as ancient people consistently understood it, a meal not only signified but brought about *reconciliation* between those who ate together. In these contexts, a meal was itself a sacred event, not like a school lunch that is just an occasion to feed everyone present. A meal involved an invitation to guests and acceptance of that invitation on the part of those who shared food together as a sign of fellowship or communion (*koinonia*).

Here’s an illustration from the history of my own family. The Campbell family of Scotland are accused of horrendous treachery in the massacre of Glencoe (1692). It is a story elaborated and embellished in folk traditions, and the embellished story involves the Campbells plying fellow Scots of Clan Donald with a fabulous meal including plentiful liquor, then butchering the McDonalds in their drunken sleep. The story is horrendous not just because

¹⁷ These five aspects are close to the ones listed in the WCC Faith and Order consensus document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982): “Thanksgiving to the Father,” “Anamnesis or Memorial of Christ,” “Invocation of the Spirit,” “Communion of the Faithful,” and “Meal of the Kingdom” (10–15). Following the New Testament texts about the Supper very closely, I have chosen not to focus on invocation of the Spirit (*epiclesis*) and instead have focused on offering (sacrificial) meanings embedded in the Supper. I will mention *epiclesis* below in discussing “Thinking about the Celebration of the Lord’s Supper Today.”

¹⁸ Laurence Hull Stookey, *Eucharist: Christ’s Feast with the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 20–22, quotation on 20.

of the murders: it is considered especially heinous because the murders followed a meal together. The story represents the violation of the sacred, ancient understanding that sharing a meal together brought about reconciliation of the parties involved.¹⁹

The element of reconciliation in a meal was embedded in the Reformation-age liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer, where the invitation to communion was extended to those “that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours.”²⁰ This wording seems to take reconciliation with one’s neighbors as a prerequisite for communion rather than something brought about by the Supper. Later revisions of the liturgy retained the reference to reconciliation but restated the prerequisite as an intention: the invitation is thus addressed to those who “seek to live in peace with one another.”²¹

Narrative and Remembrance. Being grounded in the Passover meal that celebrated the narrative of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, the Lord’s Supper rehearses the narratives about God’s deliverance of humankind in Jesus Christ (1 Cor 11:26). We call to mind the work of Christ, as he commanded in the Supper: “Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11:24–25 and parallels).

The word used in the language of the New Testament for “memory” or “remembrance” is *anamnesis*, and although some very ancient Christian liturgies do not explicitly recite the narrative of Christ’s institution of the Supper,²² most Christian communities read the institution narrative itself as part of the *anamnesis* in the Supper. Most Christian communities not only call to mind the

¹⁹ When I used to greet my friend and colleague Gary MacDonald at the Supper, I would say, “Peace to you and to the House of Donald.” Gary replied, “And to you, and your kin loyal to Argyll.” He was offering peace to the Campbells, and we need it. Gary reflected on our greetings in an article, “By Faith By Hope,” published in the journal of Clan Donald, U.S.A., *By Sea By Land* (Winter 2014). This was subsequently republished (at my urging) in the *Journal of the Clan Campbell Society of North America* 42:2 (Spring 2015): 16–17.

²⁰ In the liturgy for Holy Communion in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer; in Brian Cummings, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 399.

²¹ United Methodist Church, services for Word and Table I and II, in *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 7 and 12.

²² Specifically, the East-Syrian Liturgy of Addai and Mari; see Bradshaw, *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship*, 44–45.

institution of the Supper, but also call to mind the work of Christ in salvation, the basic gospel message.

The ancient Coptic Church, for example, includes in its celebration of the Supper an explicit *anamnesis* of the work of Christ recited by the whole congregation as acclamations:

Amen. Amen. Amen. We show forth, O Lord, Thy death, and confess Thine Holy Resurrection and Ascension into the heavens.

We worship Thee, bless Thee, give thanks to Thee, O Lord, and entreat Thee, O our God.²³

These acclamations are actually recited in Greek, though they are embedded in the Coptic-language liturgy, and this indicates that they date from an early period in the evolution of Egyptian Christianity, perhaps the fourth century. It was on the basis of this practice that the Catholic Church and Protestant churches revised services for the Lord's Supper in the twentieth century, incorporating congregational acclamations like the following:

Christ has died.

Christ has risen.

Christ will come again.²⁴

In this way, by reciting the institution of the Supper and by acclaiming the narrative of Christ's saving work, Christian communities fulfill Christ's command to "do this in remembrance [*anamnesin*] of me."

Thanksgiving. If you want to say "Thank you" to someone in Athens today, you say *Eucharisto*. It is the same word used to describe Jesus' actions in the Supper in the Greek language of the New Testament: he "took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks [*Eucharistēsas*], he broke it ..." (1 Cor 11:23–

²³ Fayek M. Ishak, ed. and trans., *A Complete Translation of the Coptic Orthodox Mass and the Liturgy of St. Basil* (Toronto: Coptic Orthodox Church Diocese of North America, 1973), 95.

²⁴ *The Sacramentary: Approved for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and Confirmed by the Apostolic See* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1974), 507, 512, 515, 520–21. This form of acclamation is no longer approved in the Catholic Church but is still in use in Protestant church bodies: Rite II for the Holy Eucharist in *The Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church in the USA (1979), 363; and *The United Methodist Hymnal* (1989), 10, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 25.

24). The narratives in 1 Corinthians 11 and in Luke describe only a thanksgiving over the bread, but parallel passages in Matthew and Mark have the thanksgiving over both the bread and the cup (Matt 26:26–27, Mark 14:22–23).²⁵ Joachim Jeremias' now classic study of *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* locates the thanksgivings for the bread and the cup as parts of the established Passover *Haggadah* ritual as Jews practiced it in Jesus' time.²⁶ In this way the Christian Supper inherited thanksgiving prayers that had been part of the Jewish ritual.

The Lord's Supper is an act of thanksgiving; preeminently thanksgiving for the work of Christ celebrated in the Supper, but it contains simple acts of thanksgiving for bread and wine, and it serves as a weekly occasion for thanksgiving on the part of a Christian community.

An Atoning Offering. The three elements of the Supper named above are richly interwoven: a meal is a sign of reconciliation, an occasion for thanksgiving, and an appropriate place for reciting the narratives that shape a community's existence. Now it gets complicated for modern worshipers, because ideas about offerings and sacrifices seem so alien from our everyday experience. And yet, they are deeply embedded in the Christian Scriptures and Christian culture, and they enrich our unfolding of the meaning of the Christian gospel. It is important to recall that in ancient contexts, an offering to God typically concluded with a meal, so this element of the Supper is interwoven with feasting and reconciliation with narrative and memory and with thanksgiving.

Offerings were a huge part of ancient cultures and remain part of many cultures today. The Hebrew Scriptures describe a range of offerings and sacrifices, not unlike offerings that were used by other ancient peoples. Offerings and sacrifices were typically associated with meals and the conclusion of the offering ritual was very typically a shared meal in which the offered grain or oil or meat was consumed by worshipers. Ancient sacrifices typically involved 1) an offering on the part of a human being to a deity; 2) the transformation of that offering by cooking it; and 3) consuming the offering in a ritual meal.

²⁵ Both Luke's Gospel and 1 Corinthians (11:25) have Jesus say, "and likewise the cup after eating" (my translation; Luke 22:17), where "likewise" (*hōsautōs*) might imply a thanksgiving of the cup parallel to the thanksgiving over the bread.

²⁶ Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 84–88, summarizing and concluding the preceding discussion, 41–84.

Participants could think of these three elements of offerings as 1) the offering of oneself to the deity, 2) the deity's acceptance of the offering, and 3) restored fellowship between the deity and the worshipers.

The New Testament associates Jesus' institution of the Supper with the Jewish Passover. The Gospel narratives associate the Supper with the Passover supper and with the sacrifice of Passover lambs (Matt 26:17; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7; John 13:1). Jesus said, "This is my body ..." and "This my [or 'the'] blood ..." in the context of a particular Jewish offering or sacrifice, and Paul's exhortation to remember that in the Supper we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" further associates the work of Christ with his atoning offering.

The letter to the Hebrews represents Christ's offering as a single offering that stands for all time:

And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, "he sat down at the right hand of God," and since then has been waiting "until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet." For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified (Heb 10:11–14).

Ancient Christians understood that Christ's whole life was his offering, or, God's self-offering through him. They understood that Christ's death culminated the offering of his life and that his resurrection, like the smoke of an offering rising to God, was the preeminent sign of the divine acceptance of his offering: Christ "gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5:2). In this particular context, we can envision how ancient Christians understood that receiving bread and wine in a sacred meal commemorating Christ's work meant that they received and experienced anew the benefit of Christ's saving work.

Divine Presence. But in what sense did ancient Christians understand that Christ is present in the Supper? Evangelical Christians have sometimes been derided as holding to a doctrine of the "real absence" of Christ, as if Christ could be present everywhere in the universe *except* in the celebration of the Supper! In the Reformation age, the discussion of Christ's presence in the Supper often centered on the literal meaning of Jesus' words, "This is my body ..."

and “this is my blood ...”. But Paul’s words about “discerning the body” in the Supper were also relevant:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died (1 Cor 11:27–30).

In the context of the first letter to the Corinthians, “without discerning the body” seems to have referred directly to those who ate without regard to poorer Christians, part of the “body of Christ” who did not have the sumptuous food that richer Christians could bring. But then again, it is not clear that Paul separated the body and blood of Jesus from the “body of Christ” that is the gathered Christian community.

Would Jesus say to those who refused to give food to the poor only that, “You have failed to serve the poor”? Or is it possible that he would say to them specifically, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave *me* no food, I was thirsty and you gave *me* nothing to drink...” (Matt 25:41–42; my emphasis). Failing to serve the poor in Corinth meant failing to serve Christ himself: “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:27). Christ was present, and he looked like the hungry sisters and brothers in the Corinthian congregation.

To say that the presence of Christ in the Supper is merely “symbolic” negates the presence of Christ among his people. As a historian, I am aware that Christians through the centuries claimed a unique or distinctive sense of Christ’s presence in the Supper. They could speak in starkly realistic terms of Christ’s presence, as in the early second-century letter of Ignatius of Antioch to the Smyrnaeans, where he derided the teachings of heretics who denied the bodily reality of Jesus as well as Christ’s presence in the Supper:

Now note well those who hold heretical opinions about the grace of Jesus Christ that came to us; note how contrary they are to the mind of God. They have no concern for love, none for the widow, none for the orphan, none for the oppressed, none for the prisoner

or the one released, none for the hungry or thirsty. They abstain from Eucharist and prayer because they refuse to acknowledge that the Eucharist is the flesh of our savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins and which the Father by his goodness raised up.²⁷

This does not offer any theory as to how the Supper could convey Christ's flesh, but I find it remarkable how it echoes Paul's concern for the poor at the Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:27–34 in conjunction with the presence of Christ among the body of the church.

Centuries later, John Calvin developed a more precise way to speak of the presence of Christ in the Supper. The literal body and blood of Christ were not on earth, he argued, because the body of Christ had ascended to heaven. But, he went on to explain, there is a unique or distinctive power (*virtus*) in the Supper “as if” Christ were bodily present.²⁸ Utilizing the term *virtus* (“strength” or “power”) as a way to represent this divine power became a hallmark of the Reformed understanding of the presence of Christ in the sacrament and in fact of Anglican understandings of the presence of Christ in the sacrament in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁹ Charles Wesley's verse utilized both the words “power” and “virtue” in this sense:

Let the wisest mortal show
 How we the grace receive,
 Feeble elements bestow
 A power not theirs to give.
 Who explains the wondrous way,
 How through these the virtue came?

²⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, letter to the Smyrnaeans, 6:2; in Holmes, ed., *Apostolic Fathers*, 252–55.

²⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes* IV.17.10–12, in John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 2:1370–73. McNeill used the term “virtualism” to describe Calvin's sacramental views in this edition of Calvin's *Institutes* (2:1370, note 27).

²⁹ Eric Richard Griffin, “Daniel Brevint and the Eucharistic Calvinism of the Caroline Church of England, 1603-1674” (ThD thesis, University of Toronto, 2000).

These the virtue did convey,
 Yet still remain the same.³⁰

And yet, despite his use of the technical language of Calvin's virtualism, Charles Wesley remained true to his poetic and spiritual vocation, refusing to concede any theory of Christ's presence, but concluding in adoration and mystery:

How can spirits heavenward rise
 By earthly matter fed,
 Drink herewith divine supplies
 And eat immortal bread?
 Ask the father's Wisdom how:
 Christ who did the means ordain;
 Angels round our altars bow
 To search it out in vain.³¹

The Supper of the Lord richly unfolds the meaning of Christian faith for believers, with layers and layers of meaning embedded in ancient practices. It is a fellowship meal in which we are reconciled to God and to each other. It is a meal at which we recite sacred stories that describe the heart of our holy faith and give thanks to God for the work of salvation in Christ. It is a meal at which we "discern the body" of Christ and in which by grace we are empowered to experience the distinct presence of Jesus Christ.

Thinking about the Celebration of the Lord's Supper Today

What shall we do while angels bow around our altars to search out the mystery of Christ? It is not an easy matter these days, especially in Protestant and Evangelical churches. The Supper of the Lord, the very center of Sunday worship for centuries, now competes with a host of other activities. From the time of the Reformation, Catholic as well as Protestant churches instituted Sunday sermons for the instruction of the faithful. Some Protestant churches

³⁰Charles Wesley, hymn from *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (1745), no. 57, in J. Ernest Rattenbury, ed., *The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley* (London: Epworth Press, 1948), 213.

³¹Wesley, *Hymns*, 213. Some contemporary versions do not capitalize "Wisdom," but Charles Wesley's printing had all nouns capitalized, and in this case, it seems clear by the colon following "the Father's Wisdom," that he meant "Christ, who did the means ordain" (immediately following the colon).

elected to have the Supper only monthly or quarterly, leaving most Sunday services centered around preaching for instruction. From the time of the Evangelical Revival in the 1700s, sermons combined with emotive congregational hymnody aimed not only to instruct congregants but also to inculcate appropriate religious affections. From some point in the late 1800s, the work of preaching to the unconverted, which from ancient times had occurred outside of church settings (for example, the sermons of Peter in Jerusalem in Acts 2 or of Paul in Athens in Acts 17), became a central facet of Sunday worship in many Evangelical churches, with messages aimed at a much broader audience that paid attention to external cultures that evangelization demands. By the late twentieth century, churches enthusiastically embraced musical and performance styles of contemporary cultures with elaborate uses of contemporary media. Meanwhile, the Lord's Supper could become merely an appendage, and its deep unfolding of the mystery of salvation in Christ could be seen as a positively harmful impediment to communicating with contemporary and relatively unchurched people.

I'm not going to solve that problem here, but I will make a suggestion that we carve out a little, quiet space—I will describe it as a “primitive” space—in the midst of worship, a space where we can retreat from the busyness of the modern world (and sometimes from the busyness of contemporary worship) and enjoy a hobbit-like primitive space (“in the quiet of the world, when there was less noise and more green”) when we observe the Supper.³² It might be a space that's uniquely congruous with the traditions of the Churches of Christ. If my perception is on target, there is a deep longing on the part of modern people to have at least some periods when they can retreat at least for a season to a simpler, more primitive environment. The celebration of the Lord's Supper would fit with that kind of primitive space, even in the midst of a modern worship service. But it will not be easy to carve out such a space in most churches.

And before we get to carving out that primitive space for the Supper, let's consider what wisdom the Christian tradition might have about celebrating the Supper. Consider three passages in particular, 1) Paul's discussion of the Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 alongside two other documents: 2) a

³² The quotation is from the beginning of the sixth paragraph of the first chapter of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (originally published in 1937).

description of the celebration of the Supper in Rome in the AD 140s given by Justin Martyr in his *First Apology*,³³ and 3) a much more contemporary ecumenical consensus document on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* that dates from 1982.³⁴ Together these documents reflect the following typical elements in the celebration of the Supper:

- the gathering of a Christian community on Sunday, perhaps with hymns of praise at the gathering and at other points;³⁵
- reading the Scriptures, both of the Old and New Testaments;
- an address/exhortation from the one presiding in the assembly;³⁶
- the presentation of bread and wine;
- a prayer of thanksgiving for the elements that has an explicit memorial (*anamnesis*) of the work of Christ including the institution of the Supper;³⁷
- the congregational response “Amen” to the thanksgiving prayer;
- distribution and consumption of the bread and wine; and
- a dismissal of the community with blessing and sending.

Many of these elements (gathering, hymns of praise, reading Scripture, address or sermon, dismissal) will be present in almost any Christian Sunday celebration. The elements that are unique to the Supper are the presentation of bread and wine, the prayer of thanksgiving over them, the congregational “Amen,” and the distribution and consumption of the elements. These are the elements that I suggest should occur in a primitive environment of worship distinct from the rest of the service.

³³ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 67:1–5, in Dennis Minns and Paul Parvis, trans. and ed., *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 258–61.

³⁴ The World Council of Churches Faith and Order consensus document 111, referred to above and referred to in the following notes as BEM.

³⁵ BEM suggests hymns of praise at the gathering.

³⁶ Following the address, Justin mentions the dismissal of the catechumens.

³⁷ BEM also suggests thanksgiving to God the Father and an *epiclesis* (invocation of the Holy Spirit) on the elements, along with the *anamnesis* of Christ's work of redemption including his institution of the Supper: 10–11, 13. See the text following on the Trinitarian structure of the prayer of thanksgiving.

The prayer of thanksgiving (*Eucharistia*) in the Supper was developed in the twentieth century in Protestant and Catholic services to have a trinitarian and credal form, following the pattern of the Liturgy of John Chrysostom. In this form, the prayer includes:

- Thanksgiving to God the Father for God's work of creation and God's work of redemption. This is followed by a transitional hymn/prayer called the *Sanctus*: "Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of Hosts! Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest."
- Thanksgiving to the Son, beginning with the transitional hymn *Benedictus* that follows immediately after the *Sanctus*: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!" The thanksgiving to the Son includes thanksgiving for Christ's work of salvation and Christ's institution of the Supper. Here or at other points it may include thanksgivings appropriate to the season or for other concerns of the local congregation. It concludes with congregational acclamations of the work of Christ, for example: "Christ has died. Christ is risen, Christ will come again."
- Thanksgiving to the Holy Spirit, including a prayer for the coming of the Holy Spirit (*epiclesis*) on the congregation and on the elements of bread and wine. This section concludes with the congregation's "Amen."

With this in mind, I return to my proposal that the Lord's Supper might be included in a modern worship service that has three general parts:

- A *modern worship envelope* at the beginning of the service geared to a specific contemporary cultural environment (the gathering, opening music, reading of Scripture, and the message). In some communities, for example, this might take the form of contemporary Christian songs, but in others it might utilize *coritos* characteristic of Latin-American worship or music from other contemporary Christian communities.
- A *primitive worship core* including distinctive elements of the Supper (presentation of elements, a prayer of thanksgiving, perhaps following the Trinitarian pattern discussed above), the "Amen" of the congregation, and then the distribution and consumption of the elements.

- A return to the *modern worship envelope* with concluding music and the dismissal of the congregation.

One of the challenges of this worship pattern would be to incorporate dramatic transitions from the *modern worship envelope* to the *primitive worship core*, then from the primitive core space back to the modern worship envelope. I envision the *modern worship envelope* as taking place in a bright, modern space with electric lights and an electronic sound system. The transition to the *primitive worship core* would involve simultaneously extinguishing artificial (electric) lights, lighting candles or lamps, and muting the electronic sound system. The *core space* is thus an electronics-free, hobbit-like, natural, dark, wondrous, and mysterious space with candles or lamps and natural voices. The dramatic transition into this core space would take careful planning on the part of the worship team, as would the transition back to the worship envelope, bringing up the lights and sounds, and extinguishing candles or lamps.

To lay this out in a bit more comprehensive way, then, the worship pattern into which I envision incorporating the Lord's Supper would involve the following elements in sequence, adding some typical contemporary worship elements not mentioned in the schema of the Lord's Supper given above:

Modern Worship Envelope:

Gathering (with greeting and announcements).

Opening music.

Prayers of intercession (if used).

Reading of the Scriptures.

Message (sermon, homily).

Creed (if used).

Offering (if used).

Transition:

Dramatic transition to the primitive worship core; electric lights extinguished, candles and/or lamps lit; electronic sound system simultaneously muted; video projection system gradually dimmed. If churches that utilize musical instruments want to incorporate a primitive element from the Churches of Christ (and from ancient Christian communities), this would be the point for musical instruments to

drop off to *a capella* (unaccompanied) singing. It might also include the vesting of worship leaders in communities, for example, that utilize stoles to designate the offices of elders and deacons.

Primitive Worship

Core:

Presentation of elements of bread and wine.
Blessing of the elements with thanksgiving to the Father, the remembrance of Christ's work including Christ's institution of the Supper, and possibly invocation of the Holy Spirit.
The congregational response, Amen.

Transition:

Distribution and consumption of elements.
Dramatic transition back to modern worship envelope: candles and/or lamps are extinguished; electric lights come up; video projection system comes up. If the congregation typically utilizes musical instruments, they would join in at this point, and if the congregation uses liturgical vestments, they might be taken off at this point.

Modern Worship

Envelope:

Concluding music.
Dismissal with blessing and sending-forth.

I have described this elsewhere as a pattern of “unblended” worship.³⁸ In the 1990s, some congregations developed “blended” worship as a compromise (an awkward compromise in many instances) between traditional and contemporary styles. The “unblended” approach described here separates out the worship core from the modern worship envelope, and rather than “traditional” worship in the core space, it presses towards a more primitive space inspired, in part, by the practices of Churches of Christ congregations.

³⁸ In an unpublished paper entitled, “A Vision of Unblended Worship.” While visiting Rio de Janeiro in 1997, I had something like a vision of this pattern of worship with distinct modern, primitive, and then modern (again) worship periods.

Conclusion

On Saturday evening, February 17, 2018, I attended the Sacred *Qurbana*, the celebration of the Lord's Supper, held by a mission congregation of the Assyrian Church of the East in Dallas. The service was conducted in the Aramaic language that Jesus himself spoke, with clouds of incense, chanted with no instrumental music, utilizing the very ancient East-Syrian Liturgy of Addai and Mari.³⁹ It was in many ways like the liturgies of other eastern Christian churches including those of Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox traditions. In fact, this celebration was held in an Armenian (Oriental Orthodox) church building, with the explicit approval of the Armenian priest and congregation.

But as Assyrian Christians celebrate the *Qurbana*, unlike other eastern Christian communities, they invite all Christians to participate.⁴⁰ When I asked about this, the Assyrian priest smiled and said, "The body of Christ is for the whole world!"

The Lord's Supper is one of the most historic and central acts of a Christian community. When we offer it today, we offer the body and blood of Christ for the whole world. The world needs the body and blood of Christ. The Supper deserves our attention, our reverence, and our careful reflection on how we observe it in the midst of the world today.

³⁹ Mentioned above as being distinctive in not having the specific words of institution that other liturgies typically had.

⁴⁰ The custom of the Assyrian Church of the East is to require all participants, including those who are not part of their church tradition, to fast from midnight (for a morning celebration) or from noon (for an evening celebration).

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Technology as Messiah

...[T]he question, “What will a new technology do?” is no more important than the question, “What will a new technology undo?” Indeed, the latter question is more important, precisely because it is asked so infrequently. One might say, then, that a sophisticated perspective on technological change includes one's being skeptical of Utopian and Messianic visions drawn by those who have no sense of history or of the precarious balances on which culture depends. In fact, if it were up to me, I would forbid anyone from talking about the new information technologies unless the person can demonstrate that he or she knows something about the social and psychic effects of the alphabet, the mechanical clock, the printing press, and telegraphy—in other words, knows something about the costs of great technologies....

Our unspoken slogan has been “technology über alles,” and we have been willing to shape our lives to fit the requirements of technology, not the requirements of culture. This is a form of stupidity, especially in an age of vast technological change. We need to proceed with our eyes wide open so that we many use technology rather than be used by it.

Neil Postman, “Five Things We Need to Know about Technological Change”

Didache on the Eucharist

Now concerning the Eucharist, give thanks as follows. First, concerning the cup: “We give you thanks, our Father, for the holy vine of David your servant, which you have made known to us through Jesus, your servant; to you be the glory forever.” And concerning the broken bread: “We give you thanks, our Father, for the life and knowledge that you have made known to us through Jesus, your servant; to you be the glory forever. Just as this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and then was gathered together and

became one, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom; for yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever.” But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist except those who have been baptized into the name of the Lord, for the Lord has also spoken concerning this: “Do not give what is holy to dogs.”

Didache (ca. 70)

Justin on the Eucharist

...[B]read and a chalice containing wine mixed with water are presented to the one presiding over the brethren. He takes them and offers praise and glory to the Father of all, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and he recites lengthy prayers of thanksgiving to God in the name of those to whom He granted such favors.

We call this food the Eucharist, of which only he can partake who has acknowledged the truth of our teachings, who has been cleansed by baptism for the remission of his sins and for his regeneration, and who regulates his life upon the principles laid down by Christ. Not as ordinary bread or as ordinary drink do we partake of them, but just as, through the word of God, our Savior Jesus Christ became Incarnate and took upon Himself flesh and blood for our salvation, so, we have been taught, the food which has been made the Eucharist by the prayer of His word, and which nourishes our flesh and blood by assimilation, is both the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.

Justin Martyr, *First Apology* (ca. 150)

Peter Lombard on the Eucharist

We are cleansed by baptism; we are perfected in the good by the Eucharist. Baptism extinguishes the ardour of the vices; the Eucharist restores us spiritually. And so it is excellently called ‘Eucharist,’ that is, good grace, because in this sacrament not only is there an increase of virtue and grace, but he who is the fount and origin of all grace is wholly received.

Peter Lombard, *Sentences* (ca. 1150)

Robert Milligan on the Eucharist

We must, therefore, simultaneously eat of the commemoration loaf and of the bread of life; and while we literally drink of the symbolic cup, we must also, at the same time, drink spiritually of that blood, which alone can supply the wants of the thirsty soul. *Unless we do this, the bread that we eat, can in no sense be to us the body of the Son of God; nor can the wine that we drink be in any sense the blood of the New Covenant, which was shed for the remission of the sins of many.*

Robert Milligan, *Millennial Harbinger* (1859)

Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry

The Eucharist, which always includes both word and sacrament, is a proclamation and a celebration of the work of God. It is the great thanksgiving to the Father for everything accomplished in creation, redemption and sanctification, for everything accomplished by God now in the Church and in the world in spite of the sins of human beings, for everything that God will accomplish in bringing the Kingdom to fulfilment....

Christ himself with all that he has accomplished for us and for all creation (in his incarnation, servant-hood, ministry, teaching, suffering, sacrifice, resurrection, ascension and sending of the Spirit) is present in this *anamnesis*, granting us communion with himself. The Eucharist is also the foretaste of his *parousia* and of the final kingdom....

As the Eucharist celebrates the resurrection of Christ, it is appropriate that it should take place at least every Sunday. As it is the new sacramental meal of the people of God, every Christian should be encouraged to receive communion frequently.

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (1982)

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