PREPARING FOR THE LORD'S SUPPER

Nourishing Spiritual Life Through the Lord's Meal

Allan J. McNicol

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To
Patricia

A constant companion every
step of the journey

Isaiah 11:6–9
Revelation 3:20

Here, O my Lord, I see Thee face to face;
Here would I touch and handle things unseen;
Here grasp with firmer hand the eternal grace,
And all my weariness upon Thee lean.

Here would I feed upon the bread of God;
Here drink with Thee the royal wine of heaven;
Here would I lay aside each earthly load,
Here taste afresh the calm of sin forgiven.

Feast after feast thus comes and passes by;
Yet, passing, points to the glad feast above —
Giving sweet foretaste of the festal joy,
The Lamb’s great bridal feast of bliss and love.

Horatius Bonar
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Foreword

The church can be defined as those who meet for weekly communion around the table of the Lord. Hence, this study by Allan McNicol, Preparing for the Lord's Supper, is important as well as timely.

The author offers a helpful guide for Christians and for churches where observance of the Lord's Supper tends to become a tradition without proper grounding in scriptural teaching. He instructs us in understanding the meaning of the Lord's Supper and guides us in making it a more meaningful experience as the centerpiece of the corporate assembly on the Lord's day.

The service of the word and the service of the table were two foci of early Christian meetings. Christians met together to hear the word of the Lord and to commune together with him.

As Professor McNicol points out, Luke's gospel anticipates these features in his account of a post-resurrection appearance by Jesus to the two disciples going to Emmaus on the day of the resurrection (Luke 24:13-35). Jesus opened the scriptures to them (verses 27 and 32); and he opened their eyes to recognize him in the breaking of bread (verses 30, 31, 35). The procedure was
repeated later that day when Jesus appeared to the apostles and others: Jesus ate with them (verse 43) and opened their minds to understand the scriptures (verse 45). Luke brings the two activities together again in the account of Paul’s meeting with the disciples at Troas on the first day of the week; the disciples met to break bread, and Paul discoursed with them (Acts 20:7). Other possible reflections of this pattern of the resurrected Jesus and his disciples combining eating together and teaching are Acts 10:41, 42 and John 21:9-19.

Other activities of a Christian assembly such as praying, singing, and giving fit into this nexus.

With respect to the model of word and table the Lord’s Supper is distinctive and characteristic as belonging uniquely to the gathered assembly on the first day of the week.

In traditional Protestant churches the ministry of the word predominates as the highlight of the assembly. Catholic and Orthodox churches still give priority to the Mass (or Eucharist) in their worship. Charismatic churches feature the music. Churches of Christ show their reformation heritage in the prominence given to preaching. However, they also maintain a catholic dimension in their practice of a weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper. They include congregational participation in congregational singing. Dr. McNicol gives a call to restoring a centrality of the communion to balance the emphasis on hearing the word and to give a focus for other activities.

The historical evidence is strong for the early Christians having a weekly commemoration of the death and resurrection of their Lord in the bread and fruit of the vine. The connection of the Lord’s Supper and the Lord’s day is reflected in terminology. The adjective “Lord’s” occurs twice in the New Testament, for the supper (1 Corinthians 11:20) and for the day when Christians met in celebration of the resurrection (Revelation 1:10 and subsequent literature). The designation “first day of the week” (Sunday in our calendar) occurs in two contexts — identifying the day of the resurrection in all four gospels and for the day of Christians’ meeting (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2).

There is no theological case for the church taking the Lord’s Supper on another day. The theological case for Sunday is obvious. It is the day of the resurrection. The earliest historical sources give no evidence for a day other than Sunday.

When Christians come together around the Lord’s table, the Lord himself presides and in presenting the food gives himself as nourishment for his people. There is perhaps a parallel to be seen between baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The Lord is not in the water of baptism, but by his Spirit he
does the baptizing and works the spiritual blessings of forgiveness and new birth. In the bread and fruit of the vine, the Lord is not literally or physically in the elements, but they are as essential as the water is to baptism. Eating the bread and drinking the cup are the appointed means of bringing Christ and his life to his people for spiritual renewal. How this works is a mystery. Like so much else in Christianity, the Bible reveals the what (spiritual nourishment) but not the how (of the presence of the Lord).

As McNicol reminds us, the Lord’s Supper is important for the community of believers. As a remembrance and participation in the body and blood of the Savior, it brings the church regularly to the heart of the gospel. Taking the bread and fruit of the vine is so much more than an individual or occasional act of religious devotion. It belongs in the context of the gathered church and is central to its spiritual life.

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**Preface**

Some years ago at a seminar a sharp accountant expressed frustration at the level of spirituality in the services of his local church. On the spot I responded that in the average assembly the singing may not always be uplifting and the wording of the prayers often could be reckoned to be mundane, but there is always the Lord’s Supper. “The Lord’s Supper,” he groused. “At our church it is usually treated as just meeting a requirement!”

To this day, these words are painful to recall. Granted, in the present climate that fosters widespread dismantling of time-honored worship practices in the church, confusion inevitably follows. It goes without saying that in a culture where “anything goes,” both the level of preparation for worship and spiritual formation among believers leave something to be desired; but I sensed the real problem was somewhat different. Many who gather around the table of the Lord have but a fragmentary knowledge of what it is. They have only a general idea of what they expect to take place. What are we supposed to think and do when we come to the table? Do we expect God to be active in some substantive way? Or is it a private experience confined to our inner thoughts and memories? Seldom, if
ever, do I hear anyone discuss these basic issues.

The reason for this book is very practical. Each Lord’s day, millions partake of the Lord’s Supper. Here we attempt to provide basic information designed to help the believer gain deeper insight into what he or she should have in mind during this time of participation. Put simply, we try to answer the question, “What is an appropriate way to take the Lord’s Supper?” “What does the believer consider is happening?” Our goal is very specific. We are seeking to equip the believer for the spiritual journey by focusing upon the central features of the supper as viewed through the lens of both biblical and time-honored practices of the church. Eating the bread and drinking the cup during the Lord’s Supper is an act of faith. But it is no leap in the dark. Rather, since it is faith in Christ, this action is a concrete grasping of what he offers. Around the table we receive his benefits—the offer of forgiveness of sins and the gracious invitation to join him in the coming banquet with the faithful of all ages in God’s new world.

Procedurally, the study falls into seven chapters. We open with a discussion of the importance of meals for strengthening ties in the human community. This discussion must be viewed in concert with the significance Jesus himself invested in his last meal with the disciples. Successive chapters highlight the major features of the New Testament accounts concerning the supper in Matthew and Mark, Paul, Luke, and John. Each one of these chapters underscores a particular understanding of the supper that is characteristic of each gospel. These features deepened our perception of what it means to grasp Christ in the bread and the cup. We round out our study by providing essential information about what happened to the supper in ensuing years after the biblical period. In the light of some recent challenges the concluding chapter centers on what is critical for faithful observance of the supper today. A brief epilogue appears at the end.

Within Churches of Christ the core of spiritual formation is found in congregational life. At the center of our congregational life remain two practices, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These are foundational. A previous work by this author, Preparing for Baptism: Becoming part of the story of the people of God, addresses the issue of baptism. This study has found a modest readership and made a small contribution to a recovery of the importance of baptism in the witness of the church. We put forward this work on the Lord’s Supper trusting that it will fulfill a similar role.

The title of this work is Preparing for the Lord’s Supper. The choice of this title is deliberate. In the ancient church the Lord’s Supper was understood to be a meal taking place under the proprietorship
of Christ. As when people anywhere gather around a table, questions about practices and appropriate conduct inevitably arise. These matters sparked issues that concerned the church from its earliest days. By use of our title we seek not only to recall the doctrines of an ancient practice, but also to highlight the many practical dimensions of what it means to conduct ourselves at a table where a meal (albeit the Lord’s meal) is taking place.

Again, I express my thanks both to my colleagues at Austin Graduate School of Theology and other conversation partners in the written work, both ancient and modern, who have allowed me to understand a little more of the unfathomable riches of the table. Special thanks for word processing and editing go to Renée Kennell, Karen Alexander, and Mark Luckstead. Finally, I wish to express special thanks to Libby Weed for use of her special talents as the editor of the manuscript and to Cherise Person for her work on graphics. Their assistance was invaluable.

As with the companion volume, Preparing for Baptism, scriptural quotations are as close as possible to the New International Version (NIV).

Allan McNicol
Austin Graduate School of Theology
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the passing of time. But even though the room has worn edges, everything is in immaculate condition; and then, from the corner of your vision, you sense an elderly couple entering the room.

Betraying the traits of their German ancestry, both in speech and demeanor, the husband and wife each carefully carry a plate. On one there is a loaf. The other has small glasses of grape juice. Several other families enter. Lively conversation breaks out around the whole room. But still, for some reason, your eyes come back to the center of the table where the trays were placed. Now they are covered by a neatly pressed linen cloth. Why are they the focus of the table? What is their significance?

The sound of chimes from a grandfather clock nearby peals across the room. It is time. A hush comes over the people assembled. A man sits at the head of the table, reads scripture, says words, and does things with the bread and the cup. After a while the plates are passed around and people eat from the bread and drink from the glass cups. It is explained that these things have some connection with Jesus. On this beautiful afternoon you think about being outside moving gently backward and forward on a swing hooked to a branch of the large elm tree. But, at the same time, you also have respect for what these people are doing. Why do they meet regularly to eat and drink in memory of Jesus? You know about birthdays. They come once a year. But our family does this every week! This is serious business. Something very important is taking place. At least this you do know.

As it was in childhood memories, so it has been for twenty centuries. Somewhere, in every sort of room imaginable, Christians have found a place to gather around a table. Those fortunate enough to afford meeting places of their own meet in an assembly where, usually, the table rests in a prominent place. As if to reinforce its importance, often across the front of the tables are familiar words of the Lord, “Do This in Remembrance of Me.” Not only are they carved on table, but these words are imprinted into the minds of those who come week by week to the same place.

But why all of this talk about tables? Tables are for meals. Often our meals function on a banal level. We gather around a table several times a day. Most of the time we are concerned with ordinary events that have significance for only a passing moment. We devote precious little time to far-reaching conversation. Yet, even those with the most mundane routines understand that some meals are special: birthdays, wedding
anniversaries, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Special meals connect us with significant events from the past. They remind us that life is not just “one thing after another.” Words and actions around the table on these uncommon occasions give texture and color to our fragile human journeys. Indeed, on these special occasions, not only do we connect with past events in our lives, but we reassemble and restructure our ways of looking at the world, and in light of these intimate encounters, the conduct that flows from them.

The Focus of Jesus’ Last Meal

Something similar was in the air at Jesus’ last meal. Jesus, a Jew, is in Jerusalem to keep the feast of Pesach. We know it as Passover. Coming in the spring of each year, as even among the Jews today, it is a meal hallowed by many memories. Already by Jesus’ time, for hundreds of years, Passover precipitates a major gathering of the people of God. The central celebratory event is a communal meal that takes place after a sacrifice has been offered. During the meal the people rehearse their deliverance, many centuries earlier, from Pharaoh’s forces in Egypt. Among contemporary Jews, Passover is a family gathering. It takes place in the homes of Jewish families. In Jesus’ day, in keeping with a reading of Deuteronomy 16:5, 6, the Passover sacrifices were supposed to be carried out at the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples had made the arduous journey of many days from Galilee to Judea to keep the feast. Now that day has come.

No item is left to chance as Jesus prepares meticulously for the meal. The gospel accounts go into considerable detail about the preparations. They tell us that Jesus sent two disciples with instructions to meet a man carrying a jar of water, whom they were to follow (Mark 14:13). As in Africa today, women usually perform this task. This man would be doing something unusual. Given this special sign, the disciples could easily follow the instructions. They were to go into a house, inquire from its owner the location of the guest room, and then make full preparations for the meal (Mark 14:15). With due diligence the disciples obeyed Jesus’ word (Mark 14:16). When evening comes Jesus reclines at table in the room with his disciples. According to Luke he states:

I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the Kingdom of God. (Luke 22:15, 16)
Without a doubt, this meal was special, and not only because it was another Pesach. Events taking place during Jesus’ mission, culminating in this visit to the Holy City, were propelling his life toward its violent conclusion. This would be Jesus’ last meal before his death. But even more than that, things were about to take place at the meal that would situate it on a much broader canvas. From the beginning of his preaching in Galilee, Jesus had announced that his ministry (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15) was closely related to the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven (God). He visited innumerable villages in his homeland and saw the multitudes subsisting at the margins. The announcement that the kingdom was at hand must have dropped like a bomb. Clearly, a new day was dawning.

In his ministry, Jesus furnished many images of the kingdom. But it is doubtful that there ever was one more powerful than that of a great banquet. There the faithful would enjoy table fellowship with all of the righteous ones of the ages. Seated at the head of the table would be the Messiah. What a joyous time it would be!

Now in Jerusalem Jesus reclines at this special meal. So much had happened during the past several years. He says, “I will not eat it (the Passover) again ... until the Kingdom of God.” Easily coming to mind are vivid expectations of Isaiah 25:6–8 speaking about an anticipated time of bounty in Israel. Was this about to be fulfilled?

On this mountain [Jerusalem]
the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.

On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe the tears from all faces
He will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth
The Lord has spoken.

With expectations of such a time humming in the air, Jesus and the twelve begin to celebrate the Passover.

The Meal Itself
Oddly enough, after all the special preparation, the biblical accounts of Jesus’ last meal give
only occasional hints that it was primarily a celebration of the Passover. For example, in Luke 22:17, at the outset of the meal, Jesus takes a cup and gives thanks. This is probably a reference to the Qiddush, or first of several cups of wine, taken in the Passover meal. Then “after the supper,” possibly a reference to the last part of the main course of the Passover, Jesus will take another cup (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). It is noticeable that there is no reference to the Passover lamb. The absence of a reference is not accidental. Based on certain words and actions of Jesus about to take place at the table, later believers will conclude that Jesus is the Passover Lamb offered to take away the sins of the whole world (John 1:29, 36; 1 John 2:2; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 1 Peter 1:19). However, aside from a few echoes, the actual details of the Passover meal itself are not considered significant enough to be listed. The main focus is somewhere else. Instead of giving us a description of the various courses, the foundational accounts in the New Testament center upon several actions and sayings of Jesus during the main meal.

Although we cannot be certain about the precise form and structure of the Passover Seder (liturgy) of the first century, it is generally accepted that, after a preliminary course, the main part of the meal started with the head of the household taking an unleavened loaf and giving thanks to God. Then the host would break a piece of bread for himself and begin to distribute the rest to guests around the table. Following this procedure, Jesus takes the bread and breaks it, but before distributing to the twelve, he says, “Take and eat; this is my body” (Matthew 26:26).

One wonders what was going through the minds of the disciples at that very moment. The fact that this word was recorded widely in the earliest accounts we have of this meal indicates that it seared itself into the disciples’ minds. To a Jew “the body” is a metaphor for “the self” as a living, vibrant being. After he breaks the bread before their very eyes, Jesus’ reference to his body indicates by this action that his vital young life is to be given up in martyrdom.

For just a moment let us elaborate further on the setting. For the Jews Passover was not only a celebration of deliverance from Egypt, but was an anticipation of God entering into covenant with them at Sinai and leading them into the promised land (Exodus 12:24, 25). All of this begins when God passes over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, and, on the basis of the sacrifice of the lamb, spares them from the angel of death. Later, when the people of God gather, no matter how far removed they may be
from this event, they also claim a share in the benefits of this time and its attendant saving event of Exodus and Sinai. Indeed, at Sinai, Moses, Aaron, and the seventy elders ascend the mount; and anticipating the glory of the Promised Land, they eat an anticipatory meal in the presence of God (Exodus 24:9–11). In a similar way Jesus invites his disciples, as future leaders of the new Israel, to eat in his presence. On the basis of his own coming suffering and death, Jesus’ sacrifice replaces the Passover lamb. The reconstituted meal will do what the old Passover failed to do—inaugurate the full redemption of the people of God. This meal was not only an indicator that, representatively, the disciples would be the first to share in the benefits that would flow from his life; it was also an anticipation of the glories of the new covenant that was about to be initiated.

So, in a dimly lit room, late in the evening, the disciples find themselves reclining around a table, joining in a hallowed meal. They can hardly believe what they are hearing. Jesus is announcing his impending death. What will happen if the course of his life plummets into martyrdom? How can this be the precipitating factor that will inaugurate the earth-shattering events that must precede the arrival of the Kingdom of God? Must they also go through a similar sequence of suffering and testing?

As if to reinforce this point, at the close of the main course of the meal, Jesus makes another symbolic gesture. He takes a cup and begins to pass it around among his followers. In keeping with Jewish terminology, Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10:16 speaks of this as “the cup of blessing” [NIV “thanksgiving”]. Commencing with Isaiah 25: 6–8, Jewish lore is full of stories of those gathered in God’s new world drinking together from one cup. Whether Jesus drinks from the cup is unclear. (Luke 22:15, 16 may suggest that Jesus abstains.) In any case, Jesus is inviting his followers, in an anticipatory sense, to center their minds on the coming kingdom meal (Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18). As the cup is about to be passed around he says, “This is my blood of the (new) covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28; cf. Mark 14:24). Because Jesus’ words spoken over the bread and the cup imply some benefits to the recipients, they are sometimes called the words of bestowal. We will have cause to examine the significance of these words in more detail in coming chapters. Suffice it to say, following the Jewish axiom that life is in the blood, Jesus, once more, has in mind his impending death. As God’s servant, his life is about to be poured out for “the
many” (Isaiah 53:12; 52:15). In death his blood (life) will flow. A flow of blood was connected with the implementation of ancient covenants (Exodus 24:8). Jesus is indicating that his death is inaugurating a new arrangement for humankind to culminate in the coming feast of blessing for all the faithful. As they all drink from one cup the disciples are the first privileged representatives to share in the benefits of Jesus’ death—a necessary prerequisite for admission to the great feast to come, so eloquently described in Isaiah.

Finally, the meal is over. The disciples have heard Jesus state flatly that the essence and fruit of his life will culminate in a coming joyous celebration around a table of bounty. But, at the same time, it would come at the cost of his life. To this day we are still gripped by this paradox.

In Retrospect

Many years have gone by since this fateful night when Jesus reclined with the disciples in the upper room. And still, week after week, believers around the globe gather and find value in connecting the dots of what began to emerge that evening. Of course, the words spoken there constitute only several pieces of a much larger puzzle, the mystery of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Nevertheless, the actions involving the bread and cup provide vital clues for interpreting the larger landscape.

Earlier the disciples had learned the model prayer, which Jesus had taught them (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4). They knew that central to this prayer was a call for them to petition constantly the heavenly Father to guide them through the barriers that Satan raises with respect to the coming of the kingdom.

And lead us not into temptation (i.e. the time of testing), but deliver us from the evil one.

Jesus was teaching them that before the emergence of God’s new world with its banquet, there must be a time of ordeal with unusual sufferings, disasters, and death. The disciples were to pray that this would not be so stressful that they would quit and forfeit their place at the future meal. It is a matter of record that at some stage during this meal Judas leaves. No doubt he was beginning to see on the horizon the shape of the ordeal to come. How did this affect the others?

Retrospectively, as they recalled this night, the disciples must have spent hours piecing together what happened during those fateful moments around the table. In word and actions they must have relived it many times. Years go by.
They see more than their share of sufferings. The ordeal continues. But the spark ignited on that special evening becomes a living flame. Amidst the chaotic turmoil in the Holy City that night they would recall that the dove of peace rested, if only for a brief moment, above that upper room when Jesus was present with them. At the meal, the foretaste was of the coming feast divine; for a moment, all was well!

The apostles continue to spend their own lives in humble service each week. Yet, wherever they are on the first day of the week they gather with other believers to remember this time. They do so in full recognition that through participating in Jesus’ relinquishing of his life they can claim their share in its benefits—forgiveness of sins—and a seat at the table in the kingdom. As Paul stated it so nobly of himself:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

Our Place at the Table

Yes, Jesus died almost two thousand years ago. Yet, until this very day, followers of Jesus still await the glorious banquet of the new age. Like the elders at Mount Sinai, and the twelve in the upper room, we too await the full blessings of the kingdom.

The years go by but the dream of participating in the banquet of God’s new world lives on. We too, as believers, return to the same table. By God’s grace we recommit ourselves to live in the power of his self-giving life as we face the ordeal of the coming week. And, by his grace, together we taste beforehand the great banquet.

By subsuming ourselves under this narrative and ingesting this spiritual food, we gain both courage to live in the present moment and catch a glimpse of what that kingdom will be. Surely nothing can be more important than this appointment to begin the week.

Many years have passed since I regularly spent a pleasant Sunday afternoon making a trip with my parents to that old home not far from the sea. After the session in the dining room, the table was cleared and mountains of cakes and pastries magically appeared—enough to satisfy even the seeming insatiable appetite of a boy. Laughter permeated the room. Adults and children were caught up in the festive spirit.

Times change and events take their course. Whether it be in the ancient house churches of
the Eastern Mediterranean or a modest home in the Southern Hemisphere in the twentieth century, the Jesus of the upper room, the living Jesus who is Lord of the church, still calls his disciples together and sustains them as they meet in his name. His living presence is the special power that gave validity to these assemblies. I for one am glad that my parents introduced me to the mystery of what was taking place so many years ago in that old dining room. It is my prayer that you, my reader, have similar sympathies.

• Questions for Reflection •

1. What was the significance of the Passover for the Jews?

2. Why was Jesus so anxious to observe the Passover meal during his last week in Jerusalem?

3. Why do the gospels not refer to the Passover Lamb at Jesus’ last meal?

4. Identify the words of bestowal.

5. What did Jesus anticipate taking place before the banquet of the kingdom?

What takes place at meals shines forth as a central feature of all four gospels. We hardly have begun reading in the Gospel of Mark before we discover that Jesus creates a commotion. Ignoring traditional Jewish ritual distinctions on purity he invites those who live at the margins in Israel (tax collectors and sinners) to his table (Mark 2:13–17).

In the ancient church different leaders (based on Ezekiel 1:10 and Revelation 4:7) used the lion as a symbol for Matthew or Mark. In later Christian art this symbol seems to be primarily assigned to Mark.
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The cover image is from a Christian fresco. The fish and loaves and the cup on the basket remind us that the feedings of the multitudes in Jesus' ministry anticipate the spiritual food we receive from the risen Christ at the Lord's Supper.