

# The *SBJT* Forum: The Lord's Supper

*Editor's Note:* In this Forum each contributor was asked to respond to the following question: What advice would you give to pastors regarding the celebration of the Lord's Supper in our churches?

**D. A. Carson:** In brief compass, I think I'd organize my advice into three areas.

*First*, make sure that your own theology of the Lord's Supper is stable, mature, exegetically grounded, and thought through. I suspect that one of the reasons why we settle for mere rote in our celebration of the Lord's Supper is that we have not done the work that would enable us to be much fresher and more evocative.

Practically speaking, that means, above all, doing careful exegesis and reading several major, reliable commentaries on the crucial passages—not least the words of institution in the Synoptic Gospels, the well-known 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 and the less well-known 1 Corinthians 10:14-22, and some passages that do not primarily refer to the Lord's Supper at all but have a rather indirect connection (such as the "bread of life" discourse in John 6). Precisely what does Paul mean when he writes that "the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks" is "a participation in the blood of Christ"? (Suggestion: Begin with the NICNT commentary on this passage by Gordon D. Fee!) Read some theological works that treat this subject from different stances.

Once in a while I suspect that our approach to these matters may be worse among the better trained, theologically speaking, than among the less well educated. A certain percentage of Baptist

pastors, well enough educated to know something of the historic positions that others have taken, feel somewhat intimidated by the fact that most other positions refer to the traditional Baptist approach (the so-called Zwinglian position) to the Lord's Supper as "minimalist"—and who wants to be "minimalist" about anything in God's Word? Though they are sure that the transubstantiation of Roman Catholicism is wrong, and are equally suspicious of orthodox Lutheranism's consubstantiation, they are less sure, perhaps, that the Reformed heritage is mistaken on this point. Feeling threatened, they never do enough work in the area to find satisfying answers, to have their doubts cleared up one way or another. It is safer, and certainly a lot easier, to retreat to well-known and comforting formulae, even if no one is quite sure what they all mean!

If this were another sort of article, it would be good at this point to lay out some of the neglected turning-points in the doctrine. But granted the constraints, my first piece of advice—and we shall shortly see that it is eminently practical advice—is to read and study in this area until your grasp of what Scriptures says is stable, mature, exegetically grounded, and thought through.

*Second*, carefully identify the various *pastoral functions* of the Lord's Supper. Once you are clear about these, it will become

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easier to build one or another of these themes into each Lord's Supper service. That will not only be faithful to the text, but will generate fresh reflection on the part of the congregation.

For convenience, I will list six of the pastoral reflections I have in mind. This list is certainly not exhaustive. All six are drawn from 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 (though these themes are also found elsewhere).

(1) The Lord's Supper is a center and a symbol of Christian unity. That is made clear not only by the intrinsic symbolism (we all partake of one loaf, 10:17), but also by the context in which Paul berates the Corinthians for their callous lack of concern for unity in the assembly (11:17-22). Indeed, recalling that the Greek word behind "participation" in 10:16 is *koinōnia*, there is a sense in which we may see ourselves as "the fellowship of the body of Christ." And that terminology prepares us for the extraordinary emphasis on Christian unity, despite diversity, in chapter 12.

(2) The Lord's Supper is a time to remember (11:24-25). In some ways it is a shocking thing that we should have to be given a repetitive rite to call us to remember Jesus and his death on our behalf. But, in fact, we can become so engrossed in administration, praise choruses, expositions of the Psalms, seminars on marriage and on how to rear your children, and countless more good things, that Jesus' death and resurrection become the presupposition of our faith, and no longer its center. So in his incalculable wisdom, Jesus bequeathed a rite, a rite to be repeated, one of whose functions is to call us back to basics.

When I was a boy, I detested the hymn, "Tell me the old, old story," especially with lines like "Tell me the story slowly": I was not into "slow" teaching at all, thank you.

But as I have grown older, I have appreciated the wisdom of so many of the lines of that hymn: "Tell me the story often / For I forget so soon; / The early dew of morning / Has passed away at noon." There are things Christians are to remember, for their good. But that means, of course, that *mere rote* will not necessarily accomplish that end.

(3) The Lord's Supper is a proclamation of Jesus' death (11:26): by this rite, Paul says, we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The verb "proclaim" is regularly used in evangelistic contexts, in the matrix of the heraldic declaration of the gospel to unbelievers. That is rather different, I think, from the way it is done in many Baptist churches. We often leave time for unbelievers and non-members to leave. Paul could envisage this rite as an evangelistic opportunity. This does *not* mean that he wanted unbelievers to partake of the elements: the context shows this was not the case. But the celebration of the Lord's Supper was done in such a way, doubtless with a combination of word and ordinance, that the significance of the rite drove home what the cross was about.

(4) The Lord's Supper is not only a temporary ordinance, but a forward-looking one. It proclaims the Lord's death only "until he comes"—and that fact holds up before us the prospect of his coming. In the new heaven and the new earth, no one will need a rite like this to remind us of Jesus and his death on our behalf; no longer will there be need for evangelistic proclamation. As the Passover rites of the Jews (from which, after all, the Lord's Supper emerged) developed over the years, it came to incorporate the wish-prayer, "Next year in Jerusalem!" Christians eat the bread and drink the cup, and cry, "Until he comes!"

(5) The Lord's Supper provides regular

opportunity for spiritual and moral self-examination (11:27-29). The precise interpretation of these verses is disputed, and this is not the place to weigh in on those disputes. What cannot be missed, however, is that the Lord's Supper is a covenant renewal ceremony. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (11:25), Jesus insists. A covenant renewal ceremony like this affords us the opportunity to renew our vows, but that brings renewed responsibility—and therefore renewed obligation to examine our hearts to ensure that this is not, for us, some merely formal religious rite whose significance we can safely ignore. That would be the equivalent of lifting our glasses and saying, "I remember the cross of Jesus Christ!"—at the very moment resolving to cheat on our income taxes, to nurture bitterness against our parents, spouse, or children, to despise the gospel, and to mock the Master's blood-bought people.

(6) The Lord's Supper can be dangerous (11:30-32). Not all sickness is the direct result of a particular sin, of course (reflect on John 9!), but this passage warns us that *some sickness may be*.

*Third*, work out some practical ways in which the themes you develop out of my first point, and their pastoral functions as developed in the second point, may be incorporated into actual meetings.

Of course, if it is your practice to celebrate the Lord's Supper as a kind of ten-minute adjunct service to a larger meeting, then you are rather limited in what you can do (except expand your practice now and then!). But even in such a limited frame, there are several possibilities. The hymn or two you choose might be related to one of these pastoral functions. The prayers and brief pastoral remarks might focus on one of those functions. Passages

of Scripture that expand on these themes might be read, and their thematic connection with a "standard" passage like 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 carefully noted.

Alternatively, it might be possible now and then, or even regularly (every couple of months?), to incorporate the Lord's Supper a little more closely into the entire service, with the hymns and reading and prayers being more closely tied to themes and pastoral functions found within the passages dealing with the Lord's Supper. If the fifth pastoral function I mentioned is what is being emphasized, there might be a time for individuals to pray openly in confession, which could be for personal sins, corporate sins, or national sins. If there is an eschatological orientation, the entire service could work through relevant readings and hymns, with a sermon on (say) John 14:1ff. or Revelation 21-22, followed by the Lord's Supper to remind us that we stand between the "already" and the "not yet" as we look back to the cross and remember, and forward to the long-anticipated "until he comes" and cry, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" Such a service could end on a high note: a joyous singing of "Lo, he comes with clouds descending" (ideally with the 18th century English melody, with full orchestra!).

Certainly on other occasions I have used the Lord's Supper with an evangelistic emphasis, used it to examine the importance of Christian unity (part of an exposition of John 17?), and used it to warn people both of God's eternal punishment and his temporal punishments.

My advice, in brief compass, is this: understand from Scripture what the Lord's Supper is about, think through what pastoral functions it chiefly serves, and imaginatively find ways to incorporate your findings into the public meetings of the

people of God.