

The Lord's Supper (Week 3): One bread...one body

1. The Supper, Church, and Culture

Human relationships, cultures, and civilizations are constituted by the use and exchange of common symbols and by participation in common rituals. Symbols and rituals do this in several ways:

- (1) They initiate into membership and mark out the boundaries of those who belong to the group.
- (2) They express and embody in action a group's or culture's key values and view of the good life, i.e., the way the world ought to be.
- (3) They unify a people's identity through time by reinforcing a common memory of the past and a common vision of hope for the future.

The Church is a culture, the social embodiment of the kingdom of God and the beginning of a whole redeemed creation. Thus, the Lord's Supper functions in all of these cultural ways:

- (1) The Lord's Supper marks out those who are disciples of Jesus from those who are not.
- (2) The Lord's Supper is the ritual embodiment of the kingdom of God:
 - *A God-centered world*: In prayer and meal, we acknowledge that God is Creator, Redeemer, Father, and King.
 - *A new Christ-shaped humanity*: The Lord's Supper forms and establishes the church as a people defined by union with Christ by the Spirit with membership, worth, and status determined solely by faith in Christ and service to Christ and not by race, social class, ethnicity, education, wealth, beauty, intelligence, or any other basis. This is the beginning of the new humanity and new creation.
 - *A redeemed and glorified creation*: The sacramental use of ordinary created things and a central, mundane human activity (meal) implies redemption of creation, culture, and all of life. "The kingdom does not involve a cancellation of this-worldly concerns; it is not another world but rather this world transformed and transfigured" (Peter Leithart)
- (3) The Lord's Supper is a memorial of God's mighty acts of creation and redemption in the past, coming to a climax in Christ's death and resurrection, and the firstfruits and foretaste of the future kingdom and new creation that has already begun in Christ.

2. The Supper and the Virtues of God's Kingdom

- **Humility**: The Supper acknowledges that we are dependent creatures who receive our life (both biological and spiritual) as a gift from God.
- **Faith**: The Supper builds faith as God nourishes us with his life and demonstrates that he is a generous and trustworthy Father who faithfully keeps his covenant promises in Christ and provides for our needs. The Supper is also a way we express our faith and it calls us to do so as an act of thanksgiving and memorial before God.
- **Love**: The Supper is divine love made food, a tangible embodiment of God's love for us and our acceptance as a member of his family. As a corporate meal of the whole united church, it also requires love toward others.
- **Hope**: The Supper is an anticipation and foretaste of the future of God's renewed and glorified creation in the new heavens and the new earth.
- **Passionate patience**: The Supper is only a very limited and partial expression of the future kingdom of God, and thus it both stirs up holy longing for the fullness of the kingdom and encourages patience by reminding us of the sure hope we have that God will fulfill his purposes in his time.
- **Joy**: Eating with God is always an occasion of joy, a festive and triumphant proclamation and celebration of Jesus' decisive victory over our ultimate enemies: sin, death, and Satan.

3. The Supper and the Practices of Life in God's Kingdom

- **Thanksgiving:** Jesus gave thanks at the table, an act which sets the primary tone and purpose for what we pray and speak about at the Lord's table. Though it is often neglected in evangelical practice, the offering of a "great" thanksgiving prayer before communion has been at the heart of the church's celebration of the Lord's Supper since the earliest centuries. The whole Christian life is to be one of "*giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ*" (Eph. 5:20), and giving thanks at the Lord's table is a discipline that models and trains us for a Eucharistic life. "*Eucharist (thanksgiving) is the state of perfect man. Eucharist is the life of paradise. Eucharist is the only full and real response of man to God's creation, redemption and gift of heaven....For Eucharist—thanksgiving and praise—is the very form and content of the new life that God granted us when in Christ He reconciled us with Himself*" (Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*)
- **Suffering service:** Although the eucharist is fundamentally a grateful and joyful celebration of resurrection, it simultaneously reveals that there is no resurrection without the cross first. When we partake of the Lord's Supper, we identify ourselves afresh with his death, receiving into us his sacrifice so that we in turn might offer ourselves to serve the world in union with Christ. In the Supper, "*the ordinary means of receiving God's offer of love is thus itself to be the pattern of our own lives together with God and with neighbor: offered, made holy, broken open, and lavished upon a hungry world....The [eucharistic] pattern is far more than empty ritual. The pattern gives us the very shape of the life God calls us to live responsibly in this world*" (Don Saliers, *Worship and Spirituality*).
- **Unity, peace-making, and fellowship:** The Supper is an act that not only unites Christians with Christ but also with one another: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (1 Cor. 10:17). In the Supper, we eat and drink together, and all division and mutual hostility must cease, lest the very integrity of the Supper be forfeited. Paul claims that the Corinthians were not really receiving the Lord's Supper precisely because their manner of eating and drinking did not promote the peace and unity of the body but rather perpetuated the social division and conflict of their culture (1 Cor. 11:20-22).
- **Celebration:** The proper metaphor is not funeral but feast, and the Lord's Supper is the feast that gives true meaning to all feasts. Jesus is present in communion not merely as a crucified memory from the past but rather as the resurrected, glorified, and exalted King seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. At the king's victory feast, what can we do but rejoice? By observing the Supper in a joyful manner, perhaps with vigorous and triumphant music and singing, we are trained in the discipline of celebration, which strengthens us to walk by faith and to fear no evil when God prepares a table before us even in the midst of our enemies in the valley of the shadow of death.
- **Hospitality:** One of the most basic acts of hospitality is the serving and sharing a common meal, and in the Lord's Supper, God models hospitality for us by inviting us to his house for dinner. If the Christian life is becoming like God, then the only reasonable response to receiving God's hospitality at his table is to imitate this practice in our lives outside the liturgy, welcoming others generously and gladly to our own tables in our own homes.
- **Stewardship and dominion of creation:** The very elements used in communion affirm the goodness of creation and human culture. Bread and wine are not merely products of nature that humans harvest; rather, they require human cultivation and technology to produce. Far from rejecting them, the eucharist involves an offering of human cultural labor to God and the grateful recognition that God graciously uses and transforms this labor into a means by which we know communion with him.