

The Lord's Supper

DAVE BAST

One of the terrible ironies of Church history is that the holy supper instituted by Jesus on the last night of his life on earth has proven to be so divisive among his followers through the ages. The sacrament of communion, as its name attests, was intended to bring us together as Christians, both with the Lord and with one another. Instead, it has been one of the most contentious sources of dispute, and even violence, during Christian history. Well, today things are better, and although Christians still don't all agree about the Lord's Supper, we can agree that it is an essential means of coming to receive Christ and experience his presence and promises.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and once again today we are delighted to be joined by Jim Brownson of Western Seminary, professor of New Testament there; and we are going to wrap up this series on the sacraments—a brief, three-part series—by talking today about communion or the Lord's Supper.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, welcome, Jim. We are glad to have you with us again.

JIM BROWNSON

Thanks, it is great to be here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One thing to note right at the outset, maybe, is that this particular sacrament, even among churches that observe just two sacraments, it does have a little bit different nomenclature, as a different name. It is often called the Lord's Supper, it is often called communion, and it is sometimes called the Eucharist in some places as well, and the Catholics refer to it as the Mass. So, the idea is the same, but it does sometimes have different names.

JIM BROWNSON

The word *eucharist* simply means thanksgiving; and it is what Jesus does when he begins the meal in which we remember. So, you know, a lot of this is really just kind of terminology without a real substantive difference.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; and the word *mass* comes from the final word of a Catholic worship service: *ite missa est*—go, the Mass is ended, as it is translated.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But one thing that most everyone agrees on is that you trace the Lord's Supper to that upper room on the night in which Jesus was betrayed. We read about it in all of the Gospels, but Luke 22:14-20 is a classic place

as well:

¹⁴When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table, ¹⁵and he said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, ¹⁶for I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.” ¹⁷After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, “Take this and divide it among you, ¹⁸for I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom comes.” ¹⁹And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁰And in the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”

DAVE BAST

So, there is the word *eucharist* there; twice he gave thanks. So, the first aspect probably of this is: Do this in remembrance of me. What is it, exactly, Jim, that we are remembering?

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; well, it is worth noting that Jesus says that explicitly in the bread specifically. So this remembering...and you know, I think centrally we are remembering Jesus, first of all, and who he is, all that he has done for us; but in particular, Paul also talks about: As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes again. And so, this remembering is not simply a passive activity, but it has this connotation of reenactment, of reliving into something, and that sense of participation...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

JIM BROWNSON

Is a different way of thinking about it. It is not just a mental activity.

DAVE BAST

You just reminded me of a great line, I think it was by a professor preaching at Fuller Seminary, Ian Pitt-Watson, who said: When the New Testament talks about remembering, it doesn't mean what a will says when it mentions: And to my kind nephew, whom I remember in my will, I leave a few kind thoughts. Remembering is not leaving a few kind thoughts. It is more active and participatory.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and we should point out the obvious here: The Lord's Supper as we know it now is built on the chassis of the Passover. They were celebrating the Passover that night, and it was in that context that Jesus institutes this new meal; but what was the Passover but a literal reenactment of the night they fled Egypt in the exodus—the night when they had no time to let the bread rise, when they just ate bitter herbs. So, the Passover was a very dramatic reenactment of the exodus from Egypt. The new meal Jesus institutes is going to be a dramatic reenactment of our ultimate exodus from sin through Jesus' death and resurrection.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; and I think it is important to see the close link, just in terms of the narrative, between communion and the death of Jesus. This is what happens just before Jesus is arrested, put on trial, crucified, and raised from the dead.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

JIM BROWNSON

And to abstract it from that story is to deprive it of its deepest and most significant meaning.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; he broke the bread. That is one of the key actions; in fact, there are four key actions at the table, that when we properly repeat the Lord's Supper we take the bread, we give thanks for it—*eucharisteo*—we break it and we give it; and the breaking is what points to the breaking of Jesus' body: This is my body given for you. We are going to talk about that phrase: This is my body...a lot of controversy over that...but the *given for you* part, just as the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed—had to be killed, and then eaten—Jesus had to die, and that is at the heart, that is at the center, of what we remember.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; and even, you know, the *this is* language, I think, points at: This *is* my body...this *is* my blood; now, you know, there are debates about exactly what that means, and we will talk about it in a little bit, but the point is, that is the focus of what we are talking about here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, the sacraments—circumcision and Passover in the Old Testament, but now baptism and the Lord's Supper in our New Testament context—they are so all-involving for us. They touch our bodies. The water touches our bodies in baptism, the bread and the wine enter our very bodies; eating is actually a very intimate act. You take something that was outside of you and you literally make it part of your metabolism—part of your body. Because we are united with Christ in these sacraments, we are united to his death, as you just said, and you have to be united to his death if you want to get the resurrection part because you cannot rise again unless you die. So, these sacraments are very intimate, they are very physical, they are very close to our bodies as well as our souls, and they involve the totality of our lives in Christ.

DAVE BAST

So, the old covenant, or the Old Testament, had its own sacraments about incorporation into the people of God; the new covenant is all about being incorporated into the body of Christ—the body of Christ—and the body of Christ—the Church; in that sense, it is new, I guess. That is the covenant that Jesus instituted; but there is more than just looking back and remembering that Jesus died for our sins on the cross in taking communion or receiving the Lord's Supper, and we want to look at what that *more* is in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and once again today we are delighted to be joined by Jim Brownson of Western Seminary, professor of New Testament there, and we are talking about now the idea of communion, another of the words for this sacrament, and that involves the idea of something that happens in the present, I think.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; and as we already said, there is a sense in which remembering is reenacting, reliving, and so the boundary between remembering and communion is a blurry one, I think necessarily so; but the Church has had incredible fights and arguments over exactly what it means to *commune* with Christ. How are we communing with Christ?

DAVE BAST

In the sacrament of the...yes.

JIM BROWNSON

In the sacrament; and one of the ways to talk about this is just in what way is Jesus present, all right? In transubstantiation, the bread and the wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus; that is what Catholics say.

DAVE BAST

The Roman Catholic view, right.

Jim Brownson: And then the Lutheran view is sometimes called consubstantiation: There is really bread and wine there, but along with that is the real body and blood of Jesus; and then the Calvinist tradition says: No; what you are eating is bread and wine, but you are *communing* with the body and blood of Christ, who is in heaven as you do this.

DAVE BAST

Right.

JIM BROWNSON

So, there is a real communion—a real engagement, but it is not in the bread and the wine, but that is the vehicle.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and the Calvinists emphasize: Where is the body and blood of Christ—the literal body and blood of Christ? It is in heaven!

JIM BROWNSON

It is in heaven.

SCOTT HOEZEE

At the right hand of God.

DAVE BAST

And that is important, because that is our...he is our forerunner. Because he is there, we are going to get there. He is our anchor of hope. We are tethered to him; and yes; so, the idea being that through the operation of the Holy Spirit in the Lord's Supper, we are actually, in a sense, spiritually raised to heaven and joined to Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and that is one of the big differences. I mean, there is a sense in which the Catholic and Lutheran views are sort of that Christ comes down to the table, but in the more Reformed Calvinist tradition, we are lifted up to be with Christ. I mean, through a mystical...incredible when you think about it...move of the Spirit, we get elevated spiritually to the right hand of God, where Christ is, and we are in the real presence of Jesus through these elements. The elements don't transmogrify or magically change into something else, but *we* are changed because we are actually elevated to the right hand of God, where Christ is seated. I think we underestimate that in a lot of our Reformed churches, but that is a pretty amazing thing to ponder.

DAVE BAST

Just to throw this in. The old liturgy for communion that I grew up with said, at the moment in the Catholic Church where the host is lifted up by the priest and the people bow in adoration for the body of Christ, in the Reformed churches these words were spoken: That we may now be fed with the true heavenly bread, Christ Jesus. Let us not cleave with our hearts to the external bread and wine, but lift them up on high into heaven, where Christ Jesus is our advocate at the right hand of the Father, wither all the articles of our faith lead us. I love that old formula because it emphasizes that we are the ones who are lifted up.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; and even in the most recent Reformed Church liturgy, very early in things the minister says: Lift up your hearts; and the congregation responds: We lift them up to the Lord. There is this sense of communion in heaven as the place of transport. And then we probably should just touch on there are folks that say a pox on all your houses, transubstantiation, consubstantiation, communion with Christ in heaven, we are just remembering, and all this talk about communion is only via our recalling what Christ has already done; and we don't really do justice to the range of Christian doctrine on this unless we also recognize that.

DAVE BAST

And it is a little too mystical for many people. They just say, you know, we do this because it was commanded, and we kind of think about him, and that is about it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But you know, one thing to push back against the mere remembering is Jesus himself. Jesus talked about this in such stark language that it actually turned people off. The classic passage, of course, is all through the chapter of John 6...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But in John 6:52-58, Jesus gets out there with some pretty vivid language:

⁵³I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life. I will raise them up on the last day. ⁵⁵For my flesh is real food, my blood is real drink...and he goes on and on here until finally, a lot of people fall away and say: That is gross. That is disgusting!

DAVE BAST

And in fact, the early First Century pagans often accuse Christians of cannibalism because of this kind of language.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; you know, I do think that here is where just remembering doesn't do justice to what you might call the objective presence of God in Jesus Christ in the sacrament. In other words, God is doing something in us and with us and through us. That is the witness of Christian faith in general. We are being drawn into something larger than ourselves; specifically, drawn into the death and resurrection of Jesus; and that is a bigger reality than we are, and it is hard to know how to talk about it.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I think the tragedy is that Christians in previous generations focused too much on the how and not enough on the what—the what being drawn into communion with Christ and therefore closer to one another; but arguing about the how, you know, it is tragic and shameful. I mentioned it in the intro to the program. You know, during the time of the Reformation, Catholics literally burned Protestants at the stake for denying transubstantiation, saying: I don't think that is in the Bible. On the other hand, Protestants—Reformed folk—drowned Anabaptists in rivers because they were re-baptized. I mean, we have blood on our hands, too. So, just this terrible history of division and divisiveness. One of the real sad episodes in the Reformation was when Luther and Zwingli met in 1529 at a meeting that was arranged by a prince to try to settle their differences, and they disagreed over *this is my body*, and because of that they split and went their separate ways.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; and you know, I think one of the ways that Christians can make progress on this today is to not argue so much about some of these distinctions that are part of the past, but to simply ask a question like: How do you experience Jesus being present when you take communion? What does that do in your life and how does that actually shape who you are? My guess is, you are going to find people who disagree on a lot of these technical issues, but when they share at that level, they are going to find a lot in common.

DAVE BAST

Well, that is a great point, I think, on which to end this part of the discussion; but we also want to look at *the* classic New Testament text on the Lord's Supper, which actually comes from Paul in 1 Corinthians Chapter 11; and in our concluding segment today, we are going to open up that passage.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, with Dave Bast, and our guest for this program, Jim Brownson; and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this is the third and final episode of a short series we have done with Jim Brownson as our guest on the sacraments. So, we looked at the sacraments in general, baptism in the previous program, and now we are concluding our look at the Lord's Supper; and Dave, you mentioned just a moment ago that we are going to go to 1 Corinthians 11, a very famous passage concerning the Lord's Supper.

DAVE BAST

Right; our church's liturgy mentions with respect to the Lord's Supper that it is a feast of remembrance and communion and hope; so there is a past, present, and future aspect; and that future proclamation of our hope is what Paul is getting at in 1 Corinthians 11. I will start reading at verse 23:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you; the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me." ²⁶For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

²⁷So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup; ²⁹for those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ, eat and drink judgment on themselves.

Dave and Jim, this is one passage which is just scary enough that it has imbued the Lord's Supper with sort of a heaviness and wariness that has sometimes become the ground for people not daring to take it; it has become the ground for keeping people not from your church from taking it. It is a stern passage, but we will probably want to talk a little bit about the Corinthian context to qualify that a bit.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; you know, I think there is one item in this passage in particular that there has been some disagreement over the interpretation of it, and that shapes a lot of this conversation; and it is that whoever eats and drinks without *discerning* the body...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

JIM BROWNSON

For some people, that means sort of mastering all of these technical details about how the body of Christ is actually present here; but actually, I think as an exegete, probably what is at stake in Corinthians is not discerning technically how the body of Christ is present in the elements, it is discerning the body of Christ as

a community, and not privatizing this as just about me and Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Especially when you look at the preceding verses in 1 Corinthians 11, which talk about the abuses there, and the selfishness of many of the members, and how they were kind of cutting out poorer people. We have heaped a lot of fear, perhaps inappropriately, and hung it on these words.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; because the Corinthians were not discerning the body, not in this technical sense, but they weren't seeing how they were deeply and intimately connected to each other, and they were acting as if what they do doesn't matter to anybody else; and what anybody else does doesn't matter to them; and that is what Paul says is problematic. So yes, there is a call when you participate in the body of Christ in communion to actually live that out in your life, but this is not a technical distinction about how is Christ present, but really, how are we together the body of Christ?

DAVE BAST

It is not a matter of getting your sacramental theology straight before you dare come to the table.

JIM BROWNSON

That's right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think, Jim, you mentioned earlier in this series that the sacraments always introduce us to community. These are not individual rites. We do not do them in private. We do them corporately because they involve us as a corporate body of Christ. We are members of each other. The Corinthians were ignoring that by cutting some of the poorer people out. They would eat all of the food before the poor folks could even get there, and Paul is saying: Boy, you really don't get it, do you? I mean, Jesus died to make us all one and you mistreat people in the context of the Lord's Supper? Talk about being at complete odds with the purpose of the thing; and so, I think that was the very big issue; but maybe another thing we can talk about because it is often an issue in churches is... I mean, there are some parts of the Reformed tradition—some of the more traditionalist or very conservative parts of the church—where people are actually hesitant to take the Lord's Supper because they don't think they are worthy. They have not sufficiently repented of their sins and they are afraid that if they take the Lord's Supper in an impenitent state or while they are still not really all that great of a person, they are going to go to hell; and again, I think that, too, is at odds with the purpose of the Supper. You only come to the table because you know how much you need it. If you hadn't been a sinful person, Jesus wouldn't have had to die in the first place.

JIM BROWNSON

Yes; you know, I think that is a lot of what we mean when we say that the Supper is a communion of hope...it is remembrance and communion, past and present...but it is hope for the future; and hope means there are things that you don't have guarantees on yet, and it is interesting that Paul says: As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again; and part of what is at stake here is that dying with Christ is not something we do just once. We do it again and again and again; and when we look ahead, we also see what are the things we still need to die to and come alive again in Christ in fresh ways? And so, to partake of the death and resurrection of Christ is to express a kind of hope about our future that come what may, whatever pain is going to come, its end is resurrection because we are participating in this larger story of Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I love the image that N. T. Wright used a while back in a lecture. It probably wasn't original with him, but he compared the Lord's Supper to the story of the twelve spies in Joshua. When they go into the Promised Land of Canaan and they bring back some of the fruits of the land: huge, beautiful clusters of grapes so big they had to hold them on sticks between two people; and N. T. Wright said when the people ate what the spies

brought back they were eating the food of the future; they were eating the food of their future in the Promised Land, and that is what we are doing at the Lord's Supper; we are already partaking now of the food of the kingdom of God when all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things will be well.

DAVE BAST

Yes; our liturgy again. It is so beautiful; I wish we would use it every time we celebrate, but it says: This is a pledge and foretaste of that feast of love of which we shall partake when his kingdom has fully come. When with unveiled face we shall behold him, made like him in his glory. That is the future, isn't it?

JIM BROWNSON

Yes, absolutely; and to see communion as something that calls us into a future that is shaped by God in Christ; that is our future; and to embrace that is something we do over and over and over again because we keep forgetting it.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee. Our guest today was Dr. Jim Brownson. We would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics you would like to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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