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The Lord's Table: A Covenant Meal

by
John Mark Hicks

Paul's descriptive language for what Luke calls "the breaking of bread" (Acts 2:42; 20:7) is covenantal in character. Paul refers to it as "the Lord's supper" (1 Cor 11:20), "the cup of the Lord" (1 Cor 10:21) and "the Lord's table" (1 Cor 10:21). He understands this supper, cup and table on the analogy of Israel's sacrificial system and draws on redemptive history (food and drink in the wilderness preceded by a baptism into Moses) to call the Corinthians to faithfulness (1 Cor 10:1-4, 18). This "breaking of bread" is a meal in which the Lord's death is remembered (1 Cor 11:24-25), proclaimed (1 Cor 11:26) and shared (1 Cor 10:16). This supper bears all the characteristics of a covenant meal, which links it to the flow of redemptive history where God communed with his people as covenant Lord.

Since creation God has sought covenant relationship with his creatures in order to establish community. After the fall, God entered into covenant with Abraham and his descendants and ultimately with all the nations toward the eschatological end of eternal communion. God's covenant desire was to be our God and we his people. Throughout the whole history of God's redemptive work, God has established fellowship and covenant through sacrifice (Ps 50:5) and has confirmed that fellowship and covenant through eating the sacrifice, a meal. Those meals within redemptive history anticipate the eschatological messianic banquet when God will dwell with his people in the new Jerusalem. The "Lord's

supper" is the present stage of this redemptive-historical trajectory of covenant meals. Since it embraces the past and anticipates the future, the full meaning of this Christian meal can only be understood in the light of redemptive-history. The most inclusive disclosure of this meaning might be the category of "covenant meal."

Covenant Meal in Redemptive-History

Fulfilled in the Clan. Genesis 31:22-55 provides an example of a covenant meal within a family clan. After God intervenes, Laban offers to make a covenant with Jacob (v 44). The covenant would be witness between Jacob and Laban of their peaceful relationship. God would not only be a witness to the covenant but a participant in blessing the parties involved, as well as a judge between them (31:49-50, 53). Both Laban and Jacob swear an oath, and a sacrifice is offered to enact the covenant which is followed by a meal to celebrate and confirm it. The meal is a symbol of peace and mutual acceptance within the clan. It celebrates and seals the peace which now exists between Laban and Jacob (cf. Gen 26:28-31 for another example).

Fulfilled at Sinai. Exodus 19-24 tells the story of how the nation of Israel entered into a covenant with God. God announces his intention to establish a covenantal relationship with Israel, and the people accept (19:3-8). The covenant is summarized in the decalogue (20:1-17) and then explained

more fully in the "book of the covenant" (chs 21-23). Finally, the covenant is ratified through bloody sacrifices and a meal (ch 24).

The covenant is ratified through burnt offerings and fellowship offerings (24:5). After the "book of the covenant" is read to the people, they profess their willingness to follow it, and Moses sprinkles the "blood of the covenant" on the people (24:7-8). Through blood, God establishes covenant with his people (cf. Heb 9:20-22). It is in the wake of this event that the leaders of Israel went up and "saw the God of Israel" (24:10). God does not reject nor consume them with his holiness, but rather accepts them into his presence on the ground of his gracious covenant of blood. On the mount, the leaders of Israel, in the presence of God, eat and drink. Exodus 24:11: "they saw God, and they ate and drank."

The significance of this statement is important. The God of Israel is a Holy God who cannot be approached by sinful human beings (cf. Ex 33:20). But God establishes communion with his people through covenantal sacrifice. This communion is expressed by not only "seeing" God, but also sharing fellowship with him through a covenant meal. God becomes the God of his people through covenant, and this covenant is celebrated through a meal.

Fulfilled in Sacrificial System. Leviticus 3:1-17 and 7:11-38 describe the various types of "fellowship" offerings. This term is variously translated "fellowship," or "peace," or "well-being" (from the Hebrew term *shalom*, meaning wholeness or peace). It establishes fellowship through its expiatory significance (3:1-5 with 17:11) and exhibits fellowship (peace) between God and the worshipper through a covenant meal. Of the four major sacrifices (burnt offering, sin, guilt and peace), this is the only offering where the worshipper eats part of the sacrifice himself. The sacrificial offering becomes a meal in which bread and drink are also present (cf. 7:12-15; Ps 116:13-17). The meal celebrates the relationship between the participants in the meal, and everyone shares in this meal—the Lord (3:3-4), the priest (7:28) and the worshipper. It is a meal where God, the priest and the worshipper share *shalom* through the meal. It exhibits the harmony, peace and well-being of that relationship. The covenant is renewed through eating the sacrificial animal (cf. Ps 50:5, 14). The Passover itself may be regarded as a type of this sacrifice (Deut 16:1-4).

The offering may have three different motivations, but they ultimately coalesce in the joy of a celebrative meal in the presence of God (Deut 12:6-7; 27:7). It may be occasioned by a vow (7:16; cf. Prov 7:14), a freewill expression of happiness (7:16) or a moment of thanksgiving (7:12-15). The thanksgiving

offering is particularly prominent in the Psalms (cf. 50:14, 23; 56:13; 107:22; 116:17-19). The sacrifice provides meat for the covenant meal, and the meal is the means by which fellowship is shared. The meal celebrates covenantal communion. Indeed, the fellowship offering was offered at key redemptive-historical events, such as covenant renewal at Mt. Ebal (Deut 27:1-8; Josh 8:30-35), coronations (1 Sam 11:15; 2 Kgs 11:14), the movement of the Ark to David's tent (1 Chr 16:6, 42), the dedication of the altar (2 Sam 24:25; 1 Chr 21:27-22:1), the dedication of Solomon's temple (2 Chr 5:12-13), covenant renewal under Asa (2 Chr 15:8-15), purification of Hezekiah's temple (2 Chr 29:27-31), Hezekiah's Passover (2 Chr 30:22-27), dedication of Manasseh's altar (2 Chr 33:16) and the consecration of the walls of Jerusalem (Neh 12:35-43). Given the redemptive-historical and communal character of this meal, its significance for the covenant between God and Israel cannot be overestimated.

Fulfilled in the Eschaton. Isaiah 25:6-9 anticipates a day when God will wipe away every tear through swallowing up the disgrace of his people (NT applications of this text are 1 Cor 15:54; Rev 7:17; 21:4). That disgrace is the burial shroud which covers all people—it is death. On the day when God destroys death, he will celebrate with his people in an eschatological banquet with rich food and the best wine. It will be a day of celebration when God has conquered all his enemies, the last enemy being death. God can then spread the messianic banquet, and all his people from all nations will sit down with each other to enjoy fellowship with their God and with each other (cf. Matt 8:10-12). It will be a covenantal meal in which God will fully dwell with his people (Rev 21:3).

The Covenantal Character of the Lord's Supper

The Institution of the New Covenant Meal. According to Luke 22, the new covenant meal was instituted during the last Passover supper shared with his disciples. Luke directly links the old covenant Passover with the new covenant meal. Jesus ate this Passover with the anticipation that he would eat it (the Passover) again with the disciples in the kingdom of God. The Passover supper would find its "fulfillment in the kingdom of God" (22:16) where they would eat and drink at Jesus' table in his kingdom (22:30). Luke places this new covenant meal on the trajectory of redemptive history where the goal is the eschatological community of God in the heavenly kingdom. Jesus will eat and drink with the disciples again when the kingdom comes (22:18). The fullness of kingdom is the reign of God in the eschaton

(cf. parable in Luke 19:11-27). However, Luke also believes that in the person of Jesus, who exorcises demons, the kingdom is already present (11:20) and that Pentecost was the inauguration of restored Israel when Jesus' ascent to the throne of David was proclaimed (Acts 1:6; 2:29-35 with Luke 1:30-33). Thus, the fulfillment of which Jesus speaks in Luke 22 has a dual import: it is fulfillment in the new covenant meal of the inaugurated kingdom (the church) as well as the eschatological banquet. When the church eats this meal, it eats the new covenant Passover (or thanksgiving meal) and it does so with the expectation of eschatological victory. It eats in the light of the resurrected Lord who has conquered death and will remove the disgrace of his people. The supper is a meal shared with the risen Lord.

This eschatological victory is won on the ground of the blood of the new covenant and the sacrificial offering of the body of Christ. The expiatory work of the body and blood of Jesus removes sin and enables the establishment of a covenant meal. Luke's language reflects the influence of both Exodus 24 (covenant in blood) and Jeremiah 31 (new covenant). This language, in connection with the Passover context, establishes the covenantal character of this meal. There is a strong continuity with the old covenant meals, but there is also a redemptive-historical fulfillment of the old in the new covenant. The type has been fulfilled and taken to a new level, but that fulfillment in the Lord's Supper anticipates an eschatological fulfillment when the kingdom of God fully arrives.

The words of institution emphasize that this covenant meal is focused on remembering the work of God in Christ. Just like the Passover, the new covenant meal is a memorial of God's work in redemptive history. While the Passover remembered the Exodus, the new covenant meal remembers the gospel events, the death and resurrection of Jesus. As a gospel meal, it actualizes the work of God for the community. The saving work of God is not simply a past memory, but a present reality through the covenant meal. It actualizes the reality of God's salvation for us now, just as the annual Passover reactualized the Exodus for Israel throughout its history (cf. Deut 16:1-8).

The Communion of the New Covenant Meal.

In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul uses the covenantal character of the Lord's Supper to counter the problem of

arrogant idolatry among the Corinthians. The "spiritual" of Corinth thought themselves inviolate because of their participation in the spiritual reality of Christ. Paul reminds them of the history of Israel who fell even though they themselves had eaten and drunk from the same spiritual resource—Christ (1 Cor 10:4). Fellowship with Christ in eating and drinking does not entail a guarantee of relationship regardless of lifestyle (1 Cor 10:6-10). Whoever arrogantly thinks he stands is in danger of falling (1 Cor 10:12).

Communion with Christ, participation in the spiritual reality of God, involves covenantal responsibility. Whoever eats the sacrifice participates or communes in the altar (1 Cor 10:18). To eat the sacrifice is a matter of covenantal commitment. One cannot eat from the table of the Lord (cf. Mal 1:12) and from the table of demons (idolatry). To do both would provoke the covenant Lord to jealousy for his covenant people (1 Cor 10:21-22). To eat from the Lord's table means to be committed to the Lord's covenant. To drink the Lord's cup is to renew our covenant with God through Christ. Just as the fellowship offering appeared again and again at key redemptive-historical moments as covenant renewal, so every Lord's day is a covenant renewal for the covenant people through the Lord's Supper.

The communion of the altar in the new covenant meal is a communion with the body and blood of Christ as well as the communion of the many members as one body. The covenant meal means to share in the blessings of God's work in Christ, and the meal means that we come before him as the one covenant people of God. Our communion is a participation in the one spiritual reality which was created by the offering of the body and blood of Christ. As the body of Christ, we share that reality with each other—there is only one body. Though there are many members, there is one body of fellowship which is focused on Christ's work rather than the ministry of its diverse members (cf. 1 Cor 1:13; 3:5, 21-23). The covenant meal is a communal meal where the people of God are united to each other by their covenant with the one God.

The Covenantal Meaning of the Lord's Supper

One of the most fruitful ways of revitalizing the experience of the Lord's Supper in our fellowship

To drink the Lord's cup is to renew our covenant with God through Christ.

today is through an understanding of its covenantal meaning. Toward that end, I offer this summary drawn from the redemptive-historical character of the meal as well as the above Lukan and Pauline texts.

Covenantal Memory. When we remember Christ in the Lord's Supper, we remember the covenant God has made with his people. The spiritual reality of this covenant is actualized for us through our remembering. It moves from a past memory to a present experience of the reality of God's grace. The bread and wine actualize the reality of salvation for us in the worship experience. There is a genuine experience of salvation when we eat and drink by faith. To remember God's work in Christ is to experience the reality of our covenantal fellowship with God. The spiritual reality of God's salvation is present through our remembering in the covenant meal. The Lord's Supper, then, is a moment of grace when we receive it by faith through our memory of God's work for us.

Covenantal Renewal. When we eat and drink we renew our covenant with God. We pledge ourselves to keep the covenant. Just as Israel voiced its willingness to obey the covenant, so we ratify the covenant in our life when we eat and drink. It is a moment of rededication and recommitment. In the context of the worship experience, we voice our commitment to live worthy of the gospel (cf. Phil 1:27). We vow to take up our cross, call upon Jesus as Lord and follow him into the world as an obedient servant. The supper is the ritual moment when we renew the covenant vow we made in our baptism.

Covenantal Presence. God has always promised to live among his people and to be their God (cf. Gen 17:7-8; Lev 26:11-12; Jer 11:4; 24:7). God is present among his people in the covenant meal—it is an eating and drinking in the presence of the covenant Lord (Exod 18:12; Deut 12:7, 18; 14:23-26; 15:20; 1 Chr 29:22). The presence of God in the meal, in the tabernacle, in the temple is a covenantal presence. This presence is found in the church through the indwelling Spirit by whom we are the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16) and by whom the living Lord is present through faith (Eph 3:16, 17). The church is the habitation of God through

the Spirit (Eph 2:22). In the covenant meal, the body and blood of Christ are present through the Spirit who lifts us up to feed on Christ and share the spiritual reality rooted in Christ. As we worship in the Spirit (Phil 3:3), Christ is present through the covenant meal.

Covenantal Fellowship. The covenant meal symbolizes and mediates the fellowship between God and his covenant people. It testifies to the reconciliation which God has enacted and the peace which exists between God and the redeemed, and between the redeemed. It is a moment of joy, communion and thanksgiving. The people of God celebrate their reconciliation by God's work; they rejoice in the redemptive work of God for them. The covenant meal is a eucharist, a thanksgiving, which assures the worshipper of God's love and redemptive work. As surely as one eats and drinks through faith, so also one certainly participates in God's salvation and participates in the community of God. The Lord's Supper is not something to be avoided in times of doubt and uncertainty; it is a gracious gift to be received by faith where doubt and uncertainty can be eradicated by the testimony of God's covenant in the meal. It is a testament of his love. It is a moment of communal fellowship between God and his community. It is a moment of communion with the risen Lord at whose table we eat and drink.

Covenantal Promise. The new covenant meal is one of hope and expectation. We live in the light of God's revelation of the end of history—he showed us what the end of history is through the resurrection of Jesus. The Lord's Supper, then, is a celebration of God's victory over death through Jesus. It is not a funeral, but a celebratory affirmation of hope in a tragic, fallen world. Through the covenant meal we proclaim our faith in God's eschatological promises, and we anticipate the messianic banquet in God's eschatological kingdom. As we eat and drink now, we eat and drink in the hope of eating and drinking with Jesus in the fullness of his kingdom.

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