

# **Beyond Memorial**

## Toward a Richer Understanding of the Lord's Supper Through a Synthesis of Spiritual Presence, Human Participation, and Physical Media

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In the history of the free church movement, there have been diverse interpretations of the Lord's Supper. Most Baptists follow variants of the memorial view developed by Huldrych Zwingli or certain Anabaptist traditions.<sup>1</sup> According to this view, Jesus' statement, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19) is sufficient support for retaining an element of memorial in the Lord's Supper.

While acknowledging the Lord's Supper as a memorial is helpful, many conceptions of the memorial view fail to capture the full importance of the ordinance. They tend toward a truncated understanding of divine action,

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<sup>1</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 385; Mark Dever, "The Church" *A Theology for the Church*, ed., Daniel Akin, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 603ff.; cf. "The Baptist Faith and Message 2000". At least certain anabaptist groups largely agreed with Zwingli's views on the Supper, cf. William R. Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing), 1986, 208.

emphasizing human action in memorializing. Such views often do not appreciate the importance of the Lord's Supper for spiritual formation and church identity. The biblical testimony demands that a proper balance of divine action and human participation be maintained. An adapted spiritual presence view that captures three essential elements of the Supper: the primacy of divine action, the need for human participation, and the formative importance of the physical media of the Supper will provide such an equilibrium.

## Conceptions of the Supper

A historical survey of positions regarding the Lord's Supper will situate the memorial view in its developmental context and help reveal its strengths and shortcomings. The memorial view appeared early in the history of the church but fell out of favor in the Middle Ages. Gregg Allison traces an emphasis on the Supper as a memorial to the patristic period in the thought of Justin Martyr, Cyprian, and Tertullian.<sup>2</sup> As with other doctrines, Tertullian laid the terminological framework for later theologians. He used *sacramentum* to speak of God's salvation (mystery) as well as rites that help the church remember or appropriate God's action.<sup>3</sup> Though these theologians had elements of memorial in their teaching on the Supper, their understanding of *sacramentum* is nuanced and thus should not be conflated with the memorial views that arose during the Reformation period.<sup>4</sup> As with other doctrines, Augustine both expanded and modified the early church's understanding of the Supper as a sacrament.

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<sup>2</sup> Allison, *Sojourners*, 369-70.

<sup>3</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, Fifth ed. (Chichester, West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 401f.

<sup>4</sup> Tertullian's argument in "Against Marcion" and his other writings, for example, suggests the real presence of Christ in the elements, yet he does not specify the exact nature of the presence.

## Augustine, Aquinas, and Imbued Grace

Augustine established the foundational view of a sacrament as a visible sign of an invisible, spiritual reality.<sup>5</sup> Calvin followed Augustine in this definition, equally discussing *sacrament* as the Latin translation of the Greek μυστήριον (“mystery”). As a result, Calvin stressed the sacramental nature of Lord’s Supper to help believers understand a spiritual reality.<sup>6</sup> In theological discussions following Augustine, a sacrament became a visible attestation of grace or favor, thus, the sacraments came to be designated as “means of grace.” The nature of grace and its relation to the sacramental signs, therefore, became an issue of theological debate.<sup>7</sup>

However one interprets Augustine, views of grace as an imbued substance dominated in the medieval period.<sup>8</sup> Since the sacraments were considered to be effective by virtue of being performed properly (by the Church) and, when performed, grace was imparted, the role of the Holy Spirit was effectively minimized.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the Church took a central role in offering the

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<sup>5</sup> Gary D. Badcock, *The House Where God Lives: Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2009), chapter 7; Allison, *Sojourners*, 370.

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 1277-78; Allison, *Sojourners*, 322-23.

<sup>7</sup> McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 407. i.e., they function independently of the officiant or recipient.

<sup>8</sup> For Augustine, the grace bestowed by the sacraments is ostensibly a substantial, imbued grace (this is certainly true in later, medieval interpreters of Augustine). Such grace is imparted to the soul of the participant, granting the ability to act virtuously. Most theologians were careful to note that the sacraments do not cause grace independently. Cf. Allison, *Sojourners*, 322-23; McGrath, Alister E. *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 89-98. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 407-08. Badcock, chapter 7; McGrath, *Reformation*, 89-98; Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 63-70. Allison, *Sojourners*, 372-74; Michael Scott Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology*. 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), chapter 4; McGrath, *Reformation*, 89-98, 159f; Lindberg, 63f.

<sup>9</sup> Horton, *People and Place*, 33f.; Lindberg, 63-70.

sacrament and reoffering the sacrifice of Christ as God's regent on earth.<sup>10</sup> While both Lutheran and Reformed traditions retained a "means of grace" vocabulary, the conception of grace was fundamentally different. Explaining the Reformed position, Michael Horton writes, "there is no substance, even grace, that is poured out into us or at work in us; rather, it is Christ himself, by his Spirit..." and, "grace is a movement of relation and not a mere handing over of a commodity."<sup>11</sup>

## Reformation Views of the Supper

The Reformers reacted strongly against the conception of the sacraments as causing and conferring grace.<sup>12</sup> In his later thought, Luther developed what has since been labelled consubstantiation.<sup>13</sup> He rejected transubstantiation but guarded the literal, bodily presence of Christ in the elements. Luther held that the body of Christ, by its assumption of human nature, is "ubiquitous, or everywhere present."<sup>14</sup>

The memorial view developed by Zwingli was a reaction to both transubstantiation and Luther. He emphasized Augustine's conception of Christ at the right hand of the Father and the notion that Christ's body must be definitively somewhere (i.e., ascended).<sup>15</sup> For Zwingli, Lord's Supper was,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.; cf. Badcock, chapter 7; Allison, *Sojourners*, 374.

<sup>11</sup> Horton, *People and Place*, chapter 4, "Means of Grace: Infusion or Ratification?"

<sup>12</sup> Michael Scott Horton, *Rediscovering the Holy Spirit: God's Perfecting Presence in Creation, Redemption, and Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2017), 18. Michael Horton, following others, labels the Reformation a "rediscovery of the Spirit".

<sup>13</sup> In his early thought, Luther seemed to narrow to one sacrament (the "mystery" of the gospel) with several sacramental signs, a view reminiscent of Tertullian. Badcock, chapter 7.

<sup>14</sup> Allison, *Sojourners*, 375-78; Bernard M.G. Reardon, *Religious Thought of the Reformation*, (New York: Longman, 1981), 106f.

<sup>15</sup> Allison, *Sojourners*, 380; G.R. Potter, *Huldrych Zwingli*, Documents of Modern History, (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1978), 94, 99-100, 106. Since Christ was ascended, his body must also be absent from the Supper.

therefore, primarily a remembrance of Christ's work. Christ's words in the gospels should be interpreted symbolically, and the elements were signs to help memorialize. Zwingli's early thought spoke of the Supper as an oath or pledge by God to keep his promise, but his later thought further emphasized the action of believers. He came to see the pledge of the Lord's Supper as one made by participants to live for Christ. The ordinance, thus, became a public declaration of faith.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps influenced by his bellicose context, Zwingli's later thought fixated on *sacramentum* as an oath similar to those taken by recruits to the army.<sup>17</sup> Subsequent conceptions of the memorial view continued this tendency to emphasize human action both in remembering and declaring faith.

Calvin's theology of the Lord's Supper cannot be described as a combination of Luther's and Zwingli's views since it developed as part of his own theological system that heavily emphasized the Holy Spirit. Even so, Calvin viewed his position as a potential arbitrator between the other two theologians.<sup>18</sup> Like Zwingli, Calvin found it unacceptable to say Christ's body is ubiquitous. The bodily resurrection and ascension of Jesus are fundamental to Calvin's analysis, protecting both from the errors of transubstantiation and from trajectories that eliminate the ontological distinction between Christ and the church.<sup>19</sup> Although Calvin agrees with Zwingli concerning the bodily absence of Christ, he still had criticism for the memorial view:

While they [Zwingli et al.] were absorbed with this point, they forgot to define what is the presence of Christ in the Supper in which

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<sup>16</sup> Allison, *Sojourners*, 380-81; Potter, 99-100.

<sup>17</sup> Lindberg, *The European Reformations Sourcebook*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 6.20; McGrath, *Reformation*, 171. The function of these oaths was to declare loyalty before others.

<sup>18</sup> He ends his *Short Treatise on the Holy Supper* by discussing the controversy between Zwingli and Luther.

<sup>19</sup> Following Calvin, Reformed theologian Michael Horton sees the bodily location as essential to a correct understanding of the church and participation in the Supper. Horton, *Spirit*, 180, 263-73, 282; Horton, *People and Place*, chapter 1.

one ought to believe, and what communication of his body and his blood one there received. So, Luther thought that they intended to leave nothing else but bare signs without any corresponding spiritual substance. Hence, he began to resist and oppose them, even to the extent of denouncing them as heretics.<sup>20</sup>

Calvin's solution was to maintain the bodily absence of Christ, but to emphasize the real presence of Christ through the Spirit. For Calvin, the elements are not "bare" signs for human remembering but they signify divine action of the Spirit, uniting believers to Christ and imparting spiritual life from Christ.<sup>21</sup>

Similarities in Calvin and Zwingli. Calvin's understanding retained much in common with Zwingli's. Likewise, Zwingli's own views interacted with and were influenced by those of Calvin. As such, the boundaries between the views are not as well defined as sometimes portrayed.<sup>22</sup> Calvin himself did not think Zwingli intended to leave the elements of the Supper as "bare signs."<sup>23</sup> Calvin could also speak of the Supper as a memorial and of the human need to reflect on the past work of Christ, although he disagreed it is an oath on the part of participants.<sup>24</sup> In speaking of a memorial, he emphasized that participants must recall that spiritual life is found in Christ; as food is required to sustain life, Christ is required to sustain spiritual life.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, the Supper is tied to the Word: the proclamation that Jesus

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<sup>20</sup> J. K. S. Reid, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1954), 165.

<sup>21</sup>

Reid, *Calvin.*, 146.; Calvin, *Institutes*, 1284f., 1361ff.

<sup>22</sup> Horton, for example, emphasizes the differences in his book *People and Place*, chapter 4, "Means of Grace or Act of Obedience?"

<sup>23</sup> Reid, 165f.

<sup>24</sup> Reid, 145-46; Calvin, *Institutes*, 1381, 1386-90, 1412. Disagreement on oaths found on 1366.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1361, 1363, 1371, 1385-89; Reid, 143-45.

accomplished all that is required for salvation. Memorial and gratitude (*eucharist*) were both proper elements of the Supper.<sup>26</sup>

For his part, Zwingli also spoke of the “spiritual presence” of Christ in the Supper.<sup>27</sup> Zwingli’s emphasis on the memorial aspect of the Supper arose from acute reaction to transubstantiation and Luther. In both, he feared a propensity to understand the Supper as a re-sacrifice of Christ.<sup>28</sup> Zwingli, thus, accentuated the once-for-all nature of Christ’s completed work. The participant is to call to mind, reflect upon, and offer thanks for the finished work. Like Calvin, Zwingli also spoke of the necessity of receiving the Lord’s Supper by faith.<sup>29</sup> Yet, for him, the sacrifice in the Supper was meant to be believers who are offering themselves to God.<sup>30</sup> Such emphasis on remembering and pledging elevated human action. Nevertheless, Zwingli did not completely neglect the Spirit. He affirmed that the Spirit is the one who gives life, often placing the Spirit in juxtaposition to the flesh which “profits nothing” (John 6:63).

Distinctions between Zwingli and Calvin. The thoughts of Calvin and Zwingli, while similar, established differing trajectories, resulting in significantly different destinations in reception and practice. Though in certain places they speak similarly, Zwingli’s conception of spiritual presence differed from Calvin’s. Zwingli primarily used such presence as rhetoric against bodily presence rather than positively considering the work of the Spirit (as Calvin would).<sup>31</sup> In Zwingli’s interpretation, spiritual presence in the

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<sup>26</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 144-53; Reid, 143, 168; Horton, *People and Place*, chapter 5.

<sup>27</sup> Potter, 106f.

<sup>28</sup> Bruce Ware, “The Meaning of the Lord’s Supper in the Theology of Ulrich Zwingli,” *The Lord’s Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford, (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 224-26, 229.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Potter, 32, 97, 99f.; McGrath, *Reformation*, 171-72.

<sup>31</sup> Ware, 231f. Potter, 100, 109; Carter, *Sourcebook*, 6.20. This discussion enters the debate between Zwingli and Luther on the human nature of Christ, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Lord's Supper was not unique nor exceptional. Rather, it was a byproduct of a memorial and pledge: "believers could enter into the spiritual presence of Christ whenever, by faith, they looked to Christ as their savior and Lord, trusting his accomplished work and continued grace."<sup>32</sup> Calvin, on the other hand, placed more importance on the Supper as a place where God invites believers to meet him and works more specially in lives of believers by faith.<sup>33</sup>

Memorial views see participation in the Supper as an act of reflection and, in some instances, as a declaration of faith or pledge to God. At worst, such an understanding could lead to a devaluation of the Supper as something that is done merely for obedience, an obligation to be completed. Oath or pledging language could perpetuate self-reliance instead of dependence. Such thinking may be evidenced in infrequent observance of the Supper. Further, the emphasis on past action can have the effect of minimizing the current spiritual need of the believer and God's continued action.<sup>34</sup> On the Reformed side, there is a tendency to overemphasize the Supper's uniqueness in a way that could result in lessening Christ's presence in everyday life. Christian spirituality may be reduced to time spent in a church building. Shawn Wright worries that in Reformed circles Christians may be encouraged to hope in the Supper rather than Christ himself.<sup>35</sup>

A balanced view is needed. Believers are never separated from union with Christ and can enjoy communion with him through the Spirit at any time and in diverse places (individually or corporately). Even so, this truth does not preclude God choosing to work at particular times and places or

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<sup>32</sup> Ware, 236-37. Zwingli's support for the spiritual presence was Matthew 18:20.

<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1292-93, 1370-73, 1381-84, 1390, 1404-08; Reid, 144-49; This emphasis has been built upon by later Reformed thinkers. cf. Horton, *People and Place*, chapter 4, "Means of Grace or Act of Obedience?"

<sup>34</sup> Horton, *People and Place*, chapter 4. Infrequent observance may have originated with Zwingli who thought strong faith and devotion made participation in the Supper less necessary, cf. Potter, 96.

<sup>35</sup> Wright, 275.



through specific means. A holistic view of the Supper must acknowledge God's presence with believers in everyday life. It must equally recognize that the Lord's Supper is an event during which God has promised to draw near and act to form the church.

## **Toward a Fuller Appreciation of the Supper**

The Lord's Supper is a commemorative act inaugurated and ordained by Jesus during the Last Supper. In a sense, the memorial aspect is foundational to further discussion. Yet, the Lord's Supper is not merely an obligation or pledge from believers to God. Instead, it is a gift from God.<sup>36</sup> Focusing on the primacy of divine action in the Supper, the necessity of participation by faith, and the sanctifying, formative power of the Supper will yield a deeper appreciation and more robust practice.

### **Primacy of Divine Action**

The Synoptic gospels record Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper while celebrating a final Passover meal with his disciples. Jesus altered the standard procedure for a Passover meal, creating the Last Supper, the basis of the Lord's Supper.<sup>37</sup> Despite widespread disagreement on the interpretation of Jesus' statements during the Last Supper, they provide a firm foundation to interpret Jesus' actions as intending to establish an ongoing, memorial rite. Yet, the Lord's Supper is not portrayed in Scripture as only a remembrance. It is also a place of ongoing divine action portrayed as an act of identity-forming ratification and covenant-making. Additionally, John's account accentuates the promise and work of the Holy Spirit in the context of the Supper.

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<sup>36</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1289, 1362.

<sup>37</sup> Allison, *Sojourners*, 386.

The Lord's Supper as a Covenantal Event. Jesus calls the cup "my blood of the covenant" (Matt. 26:28, Mark 14:24) or "the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). Horton underlines the effect of Christ's acts in executing a covenant and effecting a new reality. He writes, "In the covenantal economy, the function of signs is not primarily to express an inner experience or wish. Nor is it primarily to refer symbolically to a state of affairs that transcends it. Rather, it is an obligation-creating act in the present..."<sup>38</sup> Allison, as a Baptist, likewise points out the covenantal nature of the event while retaining a greater emphasis on the newness or discontinuity of the covenant Christ implemented.<sup>39</sup> While Jesus goes beyond the Passover rite to establish a new covenant based on his blood, the covenants of the Old Testament remain the backdrop of Jesus' actions. Consequently, the thematic, typological elements of the Passover and features of covenant-making in the Old Testament are necessary to understand what was occurring in the establishment of the Lord's Supper.

The Old Testament presents God as the primary actor in covenant-making. Signs of the covenant were given to help the people called by God understand and remember his works and promises. Covenant ratifications were given as an assurance that God was active and would bring his promises to completion, as can be seen in the case of Abraham (Gen 15). The Lord's Supper, when considered as a ratification sign, is not only recalling past action, but is also the promise of present, ongoing divine action to fulfill his promises. In speaking of the Lord's Supper, Calvin emphasized it as a sign of God's present action to uphold his promises:

We are quickened by the true partaking of him... As it is not the seeing but the eating of bread that suffices to feed the body, so the soul must truly and deeply become partaker of Christ that it

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<sup>38</sup> Horton. *People and Place*, chapter 4, "Presence as Action". This view builds on Calvin but goes beyond his thought. Calvin primarily views the sacraments as a testimony to a spiritual "state-of-affairs".

<sup>39</sup> Allison, *Sojourners*, 395f.

may be quickened to spiritual life by his power. . . he also testifies and seals in the Supper—not by presenting a vain and empty sign, but by manifesting there the effectiveness of his Spirit to fulfill what he promises.<sup>40</sup>

The Supper helps believers amid weak and wavering faith.<sup>41</sup> It provides assurance of God's favor and attests that the promises of the gospel are presently and personally applicable. Calvin pictured the Supper as more than just intellectual assent but as a place the gospel is visualized in embodied life. As visual portrayal of the gospel, it reminds the church that Christ accomplished all that is necessary and is the present source of spiritual life. The Spirit is currently uniting and perfecting, and one day, God will fully accomplish all that was promised. The realization of God's present working is meant to inspire trust and faith, and lead one to cling to Christ while forsaking all other assurances.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, the Supper can be seen as an act of "performative communication" that encompasses past completion, present participation, and a future, eschatological hope.<sup>43</sup>

The Lord's Supper as a Work of the Spirit. The differences in John's gospel have caused discussion over the timing of the Last Supper and whether it can be considered a Passover feast.<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Pennington explains the differences: "John has chosen to emphasize other elements. . . when we take the fourfold witness [of the gospels] as a whole then, it is not difficult to see multiple strands of interconnectivity which are not easily separated or

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<sup>40</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1365, 1370.

<sup>41</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1281, 1371; Calvin, *Treatises*, 151-53.

<sup>42</sup> Reid, 150.

<sup>43</sup> Horton, *People and Place*, chapter 4, "Sacraments as Treaty Ratification".

<sup>44</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Was the Last Supper a Passover Meal?" in *The Lord's Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, eds., Schreiner, Thomas R, and Matthew R Crawford, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology, 10, (Nashville, Tenn.: B & H Academic, 2010).

un-twined.”<sup>45</sup> John enhances the context of the meal with Jesus’ discourse on the sending and work of the Holy Spirit. Including this context is necessary for a correct understanding of divine action during the Supper.<sup>46</sup>

Christ’s departure was a central concern of the upper room discourse. Comfort is given by the promise of the Spirit.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Calvin’s solution to the bodily absence of Christ was to emphasize the presence of the Spirit as the mediator to accomplish Jesus’ promises in his farewell discourse (presence, union, sustenance).<sup>48</sup> The coming of a new Helper would mediate Christ’s presence.<sup>49</sup> Christ also speaks of himself as the vine in which his disciples will find sustenance and life.<sup>50</sup> Since this promise is given its inauguration, it is right to see the Lord’s Supper as a vehicle for illuminating both the reality of Christ’s presence by the Spirit and his status as the life-giving vine.<sup>51</sup> It should, consequently, be seen as a time in which the Spirit is especially active in showing, reminding, and carrying out the mediation of Christ’s presence in a profound way. The Lord’s Supper is not the only time believers experience union with Christ or his presence by the Spirit; even so, God’s omnipresence

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<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Pennington, “The Lord’s Supper in the Fourfold Witness of the Gospels”, *The Lord’s Supper*, 32.

<sup>46</sup> Horton, *Spirit*, 123-36, 149-60; Graham Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 222-24.

<sup>47</sup> Horton, *Spirit*, 125.

<sup>48</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1373.

<sup>49</sup> Gregg Allison and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit, Theology for the People of God*, (Nashville: B&H Academic: 2020), 448f.; Horton, *Spirit*, 125, 149, 150, 176.

<sup>50</sup> Horton, *Holy Spirit*, 125.

<sup>51</sup> Calvin writes, “For though he has taken his flesh away from us, and in the body has ascended. . . He shows his presence in power and strength, is always among his own people, and breathes his life upon them, and lives in them, sustaining them, strengthening, quickening, keeping them unharmed, as if he were present in the body. In short, he feeds his people with his own body, the communion of which he bestows upon them by the power of his Spirit”, *Institutes*, 1381.

should not deter from acknowledging God's particular presence and action at certain times.<sup>52</sup>

## Participation by Faith

The primacy of divine action in the Lord's Supper does not minimize the reality and importance of human participation. The foundational facet of participation in the Lord's Supper is an act of obedience. In this sense, it is appropriate to accentuate the Supper as an ordinance.<sup>53</sup> As an act of remembrance, it also inspires dependence and orients the believer to the gracious working of God. Calvin discusses such dependence, writing, "to 'believe with all our heart' is not to believe Christ perfectly, but only to embrace him from the heart and with a sincere mind; not to be sated with him, but to hunger, thirst, and aspire to him with fervent affection."<sup>54</sup>

In a certain sense, the Lord's Supper can be compared to other spiritual disciplines, albeit one expressly ordained by God. It is a response of faith to God's revelation in his Word, which establishes the Lord's Supper as both a memorial and a place where God meets participants. In obediently keeping the Supper, believers place themselves in a receptive state, orienting themselves to the working of the Spirit of God. It is an act of faith to which God's faithfulness grants efficacy.<sup>55</sup>

Participation in 1 Corinthians 10-11. Participation in the Lord's Supper goes beyond merely an act of obedience and remembrance. Paul's discussion

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<sup>52</sup> Gregg Allison elucidates: My claim embraces both the ontological presence of Christ in observances of the Lord's Supper, as well as the particular manifestation of his covenantal presence. . . . As Christ promised his spiritual presence to accompany his church as it carries out the Great Commission (Matt. 28:20) and as it engages in church discipline (Matt. 18:20), so too the Savior and all of the salvific benefits associated with his sacrificial death are present in celebrations of the Lord's Supper. Allison, *Sojourners*, 396.

<sup>53</sup> Allison, *Sojourners*, 396.

<sup>54</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1283.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 3:7

of the observance of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 and 11:17f. is highly instructive. Allison helpfully explains, "The language employed... is about participation, not identification, Christians participate in the blood and body of Jesus Christ... participation goes beyond remembering."<sup>56</sup> To participate in the Lord's Supper is to experience union with Christ by the Spirit. This participation is in fellowship with God and with the church, which is why the improper observance by the Corinthians was so serious; it tarnished the *koinonia* that the Supper is meant to symbolize and generate.<sup>57</sup>

Proper participation also includes self-examination. Examination is not to ensure perfection or personal worthiness but to place the focus on one's need for Christ (and to develop a hunger for him). It is also to discern the church as the body of Christ, the oneness that is implied by sharing in one loaf and Spirit (1 Cor. 10:17).<sup>58</sup> The unification of believers in one body is a Pauline theme throughout the epistles (cf. Eph. 2:22; Eph. 4:1-16; Rom.12). Participation in the Lord's Supper is, therefore, a highly communal act and one that is meant to generate both community and unity. As such, the Lord's Supper, when rightly interpreted, is counter-cultural to individualistic Western society.<sup>59</sup> In its observance, divine action is primary, but human participation by faith is essential. Improper observance or lack of faith renders the Supper not only ineffective, but inversely causes the presence of the Spirit in judgement instead of comfort. The Supper calls participants to look to Christ and cling to him, forsaking all else. It spurs them to perceive the church as united in being joined as one body to Christ. Participants must, therefore, examine themselves to ensure proper focus on the body of Christ and safeguard against lingering dissention among the members of the church.

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<sup>56</sup> Allison, *Sojourners*, 396, 398.

<sup>57</sup> Horton, *Spirit*, 176; Schreiner, *Lord's Supper*, 70-72; Badcock, chapter 5.

<sup>58</sup> Allison, *Sojourners*, 394; Reid, 150-51; Calvin, *Institutes*, 1419-20.

<sup>59</sup> Badcock, chapter 5, "The Nature of Community: Three Models."

## Formation through the Supper

Memorial views can also lend themselves to over-emphasizing the mental state of reflection. Participation in the Lord's Supper is necessarily both bodily and communal.<sup>60</sup> The active presence of the Spirit remains the primary cause granting its benefits and formational qualities. Even so, the media remain important. A medium is the means by which something is communicated or expressed. The media of Lord's Supper are purposely physical and were given to support its purpose.

The media used in any act of communication not only conveys a message, but also has a formative effect on how the message is received, perceived, and understood.<sup>61</sup> Further, sociologists often speak of the effects of society on the perception of truth.<sup>62</sup> A medium is not always formative on the conscious level of opinions or concepts; rather, it often functions on a pre-reflective or presuppositional level.<sup>63</sup> James K.A. Smith arrives at a similar conclusion in discussing the importance of worship and its forms. Smith argues the affections are formed by the narratives, values, and aesthetic dispositions of a person, which are in turn formed primarily by bodily action or participation.<sup>64</sup> The Lord's Supper can be seen as a translation of the gospel message into physical media that intersect humanity's bodily existence. The Spirit works in illuminating minds to understand what is being communicated in the Supper.<sup>65</sup> The physical media--the spoken word, the bread, the wine (or

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<sup>60</sup> Potter, 95; Calvin, *Institutes*, 1278; Reardon, 106-109; McGrath, *Reformation*, 159, 162-164.

<sup>61</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 23, 62-66. Nancy K. Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Digital Media and Society Series, (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015), 28ff.

<sup>62</sup> Alan Jacobs, *How to Think*, (New York: Crown Publishing, 2017), chapters 2-3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>64</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies, V. 2, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 109-119; James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, Cultural Liturgies, V. 1, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 38ff.

<sup>65</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1284-86.

juice), and the gathered church matter as formative agents that give corporeal signs to the truths being communicated. Thus, improper observance, as among the Corinthians (1 Cor. 11:17-34), is grave because it distorts the message. Such distortion may be obvious or more subtle.

The importance of bodily participation. Calvin repeatedly stressed the importance of the elements as a physical analogy that helps believers understand the spiritual reality; they are given as corporeal elements because embodied humans need their aid to understand.<sup>66</sup> Luther likewise linked the elements of the sacrament to Christ's incarnation: "We see a frail, weak and mortal human being – yet he is nothing other than the majesty of God himself. In precisely the same way, God himself speaks to us and deals with us in these ordinary and despised materials."<sup>67</sup> The Lord's Supper can, accordingly, be seen as an embodied presentation of the gospel, in which the believing participant feels and tastes the symbols of Jesus' work and divine favor.<sup>68</sup> Some mistakenly see the goal of Christian life as departure from the body. Instead of inspiring believers toward disembodiment, the Supper reminds them of the coming new creation, when believers will be raised bodily and participate in the wedding feast.

Other Media of the Supper. The elements are not the only operative media in the Supper. Briefly, a few others may be discussed. The practice of the Lord's Supper is tied to the Word and its proclamation.<sup>69</sup> Joined to the reading of Scripture, the physicality of the ordinance communicates to the congregation with multiple senses. Moreover, the gathered community is an important medium. It is a reminder that together the participants are being formed into members of one body (Eph. 2:16, 4:4) and the beautiful bride (Eph. 5:22-24). The communal nature of the Supper is not merely something

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<sup>66</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1363, 1364, 1371, 1381, 1390.

<sup>67</sup> McGrath, *Reformation*, 164.

<sup>68</sup> Allison, *Sojourners*, 395-96.

<sup>69</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1416; cf. 1292, 1417-18.



that is taught, but felt as participants gather and partake in one table and one loaf. In the communal act, they are being shown that their salvation is not solely an individual matter.<sup>70</sup>

Finally, believing participants themselves can be said to be a medium of the Spirit, for the Spirit is creating through their participation. The Spirit is operative to complete that which God has begun (Phil. 1:6). The Spirit, in forming and perfecting the church, brings about a foretaste of the eschatological hope to which the Supper points.<sup>71</sup> The Spirit works using these created means to perfect and direct the church toward its intended end.<sup>72</sup>

This action of the Spirit is also a message to the world. Those who were once far off are now reconciled to God in one body, being built into a holy temple (Eph. 2:11-22). The church's radical unity and nature reveal the power of the gospel (cf. John 13:35). Like wives and husbands reflecting the mystery of Christ and church, the unity of the church itself reflects the truth of the gospel to the world.<sup>73</sup> This unity is not carried out solely by human effort. Rather, it is a creation of the Spirit as humans participate in worship and communion together.

## Conclusion

The three facets discussed above provide the basis for a richer appreciation of the Lord's Supper than is provided by many conceptions of the memorial view. Foundational to a healthy understanding the Lord's Supper is to understand it first as a divine action. The Lord's Supper is not only a remembrance of past divine action but also a present working of the Spirit that inspires hope in Christ and orients believers to a future eschatological hope of completion.

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<sup>70</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1415-16.

<sup>71</sup> Horton, *Spirit*, 159-60, 180.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 258-260; Cole, 103; Köstenberger and Allison, 268-69.

<sup>73</sup> Allison, *Sojourners*, 408.

Although divine action is primary, it is also appropriate to speak of the Lord's Supper as an ordinance in which believers participate in faith and obedience. It is a place where believers can expect God to meet them. Accordingly, it should be expected to be a highly formative event. It is not the only place or time God is present and active. It is, however, a significant moment of divine presence and promised activity.

Finally, the means the Spirit uses to form believers as they participate in the Lord's Supper are significant since they communicate profoundly to humans in their embodiment. The Lord's Supper is a multi-media event, and each medium is active in communicating to believing participants. As an act of embodied participation in a picture of the gospel, it grants assurance and generates unity in the covenant community. Partakers are taught through a tangible, bodily act to rely upon Christ and to be the body of Christ. As such, it is an identity building event. Not only are individuals formed in the likeness of Christ, the church collectively is shown as the body of Christ.

The church should place a high value on appropriately and consistently observing the Lord's Supper. As such, the church teaches its correct observance in conjunction with the act, lifting it up as a special moment for the body. Since it is a source of unity and assurance, frequent observance of the Supper is ideal.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, the physicality of the Lord's Supper illuminates the importance of physical presence and gathering as the church. Although digital media can be valuable to the church's mission, virtual practice of the Lord's Supper will necessarily be lacking.

Admired amidst the distractions of life, the Supper is a prod to cling to Christ as the sole source of true life. For the toils and trials that cause faith to waver and wane, it is a reminder that God has not forsaken his children. God will unfailingly accomplish all he has promised. As believers wait now, the Supper proclaims that they are receiving all Christ has won through the Spirit as a seal (Eph. 1:13). At the Table, believers are oriented to an

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<sup>74</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1421-23; Allison, *Sojourners*, 399.

eschatological hope that asserts Christ is better than all else and that he will return for his bride. Partaking in the Lord's Supper, believers celebrate that they will, because of God's faithfulness, participate in the marriage supper of the Lamb. The Supper is at the intersection of past action, present hope, and future reality. The church needs this formative event so that by the Spirit it may continue to groan, "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20).

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