

Re-thinking The Lord's Supper

By Michael S. Horton

Part 6 of a 6-part series on Worship

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You know, it's ironic to me that in our day, as in every day of decline and superstition throughout church history, people turn from God's miracles to their own. What do I mean by that? Well, once people stop believing that salvation is a miracle and begin thinking that it is simply the result of human decision and effort, before long they create substitute miracles in order to retain some sense of the supernatural. Then, when they deny that in the Word the Holy Spirit miraculously creates faith and repentance, they must seek their signs through leg-lengthening. And when they deny that in the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper Christ is actually miraculously given, they seek their own revelations and their own signs and wonders.

Churches that follow the apostolic, Reformation faith are charismatic in the fullest sense of that term. That is, they believe that every service of Word and Sacrament is a time of signs and wonders. They eagerly anticipate--or, at least, should eagerly anticipate, the miraculous when they come to church, because God has promised that when we gather to worship and receive God's forgiveness, he will faithfully feed his flock in the wilderness. But we often become like the cynical generation of Israelites in the wilderness who, when God reaffirmed his promise to feed them, cried out, "What! Is the Lord going to spread out a banquet table for us right here in the middle of the desert?" But that is precisely what God does. He is a wonder-working God who feeds us among the thorns and sand of our spiritual wasteland, when and where we are least expecting.

But what Shepherd gives his own flesh for food and his own blood for drink? What god gives his body for the life of his worshippers? Has anyone ever heard of such a thing? Yes, indeed! Our Savior declares, "Whosoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has everlasting life." First, let's put things in perspective: There are essentially 4 views of what happens in Holy Communion. First, there is the Roman Catholic view, which is familiar to many. The official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is that the bread and wine are actually changed into the body and blood of Christ. This is called "transubstantiation," from two words meaning, "to change substance." The bread still looks like bread and the wine still has all of the appearances of wine, but appearances are deceiving. Furthermore, the Lord's Supper, according to the Roman Catholic Church, is the repetition of Christ's atoning sacrifice and every time one participates in this sacrament, they believe that Christ is being sacrificed again on the altar for their sins. This, of course, is blasphemy, especially in the light of Hebrews, which is given for the express purpose of demonstrating that the sacrificial system came to an end in Jesus Christ, the final sacrifice for sins once offered.

At the time of the Reformation, however, Protestants differed in their understanding of what actually was received--and how--in Holy Communion. First, the Anabaptists interpreted this meal as merely a memorial or symbolic remembering of Christ's death. The purpose was to arouse a sense of gratitude and duty in the light of the suffering Jesus endured for us. The Lutherans argued that this denied Christ's express statement, "This is my body," and made this sacrament into the work of man, because the activity was human--my remembering, rather than divine--God forgiving. Lutherans believe, therefore, that Christ is physically present at the altar in this sacrament, but deny the Roman Catholic doctrine of a change in substance from bread and wine into body and blood. They also, of course, deny the notion of a resacrifice of Christ. The Reformed, after Calvin, were influenced by the Eastern

Orthodox interpretation, arguing, along with Lutherans and Roman Catholics, that Christ is truly communicated through this sacrament, against the Anabaptist view of Communion as a mere memorial. But they believed that the mode or means of receiving Christ was by the Holy Spirit uniting believers to Christ in heaven through the elements of bread and wine. Now, these issues may at first sound confusing and you may be wondering, "Why do Christians fight over such secondary issues?" But remember that this is a sacrament instituted not by Athanasius or Augustine, Luther, Calvin, or Wesley, but by our Lord Jesus Christ. He commanded a perpetual and frequent administration of this Holy Supper until his return and the apostle Paul warns the Corinthians that the reason many of them are experiencing an untimely death is because they do not properly recognize the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion. Because of their casual view of the Supper, turning this holy mystery into a sacrilege, they are actually eating and drinking judgment. If this Supper is a "secondary" issue, why does the apostle say that people are eating and drinking judgment?

The apostle Paul says, in fact, that Holy Communion is an actual participation in the body and blood of Christ: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving...a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread the we break a participation in the body of Christ?" "Therefore," says Paul, "whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the memory of the body and blood of the Lord." Is that it? No, Paul says that he "will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord."

But the purpose of this Holy Supper is not to hold out judgment, but rather to hold out God's forgiveness and pardon. Through it, we receive the benefits of Christ's death and present intercession; in fact, through it, we receive nothing less than Christ himself.

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