

# What Did God Say about Baptism and the Lord's Supper?

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Dipping people in water, breaking and eating bread together, and drinking wine together do not immediately strike us as indispensable aspects of the faith of Jesus Christ. If anything, we might have a tendency to consider them rather irrelevant to real Christianity. Isn't the essence of Christianity spiritual? What can it have to do with these very physical actions?

Yet Jesus specifically commanded that all of his followers engage in these actions to the end of the age. Why are they so significant? I submit that these are spiritually defining practices. Without these practices, the church would be literally a no-thing in this present world. Without these practices, the proclamation of the gospel would be a stunted, unfruitful plant. Without these practices, we cannot accomplish the mission of Christ. Pastors who want to build God's temple out of gold, silver, and precious stones will invest serious effort into rightly practicing these defining ordinances.

We will never sufficiently understand these actions if we attempt to examine them on their own, apart from the revelatory framework that God has given us in the Scriptures. In one sense, these practices are implicated in our entire system of belief and practice, as previous generations of Christians commonly understood. Augustine, for example, prayed,

“O Lord our God, we believe in you, Father and Son and Holy Spirit. Truth would not have said, ‘Go and baptize the nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ (Mt 28:19), unless you were Trinity. Nor would you have commanded us to be baptized, Lord God, in the name of any who is not Lord God....Directing my attention to this rule of faith as best I could, as far as you enabled me to, I have sought you and desired to see intellectually what I have believed....Do you yourself give me the strength to seek, having caused yourself to be found and having given me the hope of finding you more and more....Let me remember you, let me understand you, let me love you. Increase these things in me until you refashion me entirely.”<sup>1</sup>

## Union with Christ

A cursory look at the texts on baptism and the Lord's Supper suggests that we ought to view them from the perspective of union with Christ (e.g. Gal 3:27; 1 Cor 10:16). Baptism and the Lord's Supper are repeatedly linked in Scripture with the person and work of Jesus Christ as applied to us by the Spirit. The incarnation, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and coming again of Jesus Christ are the soil from which grows the practices of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Our connection with Christ is what gives

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<sup>1</sup> Following the translation of Edmund Hill (*The Trinity* [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991], 436) as altered by Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 292.

these ordinances their meaning. When we grasp union with Christ rightly, we will see why these actions are both impotent in themselves and yet indispensable to Christianity. We will see why they are physical actions which are spiritual in nature.

Union with Christ is the spiritual union of each believer and all believers to Christ. Spiritual union means a connection which the Holy Spirit produces, not an immaterial or strictly “internal” unity. Union with Christ is a comprehensive relationship which includes all aspects of God’s redemption as it relates to us. We were chosen in Christ, we are in Christ with regard to his death, burial, and resurrection, and we are raised with Christ, seated in the heavenlies. Our justification, sanctification, and adoption into the family of God are all in Christ. Based upon the Scriptures, we can distinguish three aspects of our union with Christ—as it exists in the mind and plan of God, as it is worked out in history, and as it is applied to our actual experience of salvation.<sup>2</sup> Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are specifically manifestations of the last two aspects, flowing from the first aspect.

When God gave us the Scriptures, he used several comparisons to describe for us the deep and mysterious relationship between Christ and each one of his people: vine and branches (John 15:1-8), representative and his people (Rom 5:12-19; 1 Cor 15:22), cornerstone and the building stones (Eph 2:20-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5), head and the body (Eph 1:22-23; 4:15-16), and husband and wife (Eph 5:22-32). But in addition to these analogies, Scripture gives us one more comparison regarding our relationship with him – the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. Of course, we should not assume that the relationship we have in Christ is identical to the relationship of the Father and the Son. Rather, it is *like* it, or similar to it. But even with that caveat, we recognize when we read these words of Christ that we are dealing with something that surpasses knowledge. This whole idea of union with Christ is sometimes called mystical or mysterious. This means that we could never know it or comprehend it except God reveal it to us. But because God has revealed it to us, there are some things we can know, and we need to unpack these a bit in order to lay the foundation for our consideration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

1. Just as the Son was inseparably identified with the Father (John 5:17, 23), so all believers are inseparably identified with Christ (Matt 25:40; Acts 9:4).
2. Just as the Son depends upon and obeys the Father, we are dependent upon and obedient to the Son (John 15:10).
3. Just as the Son reveals what the Father gave him (John 17:6, 8), so our union with the Son is related to our acceptance of the words the Son gives us. Faith is the instrument God uses to unite us to his Son.
4. Just as the unity of the Father and the Son involves oneness of purpose, love, and action, so our unity with the Son means we are one in purpose, love, and action. To

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<sup>2</sup> For this three-fold distinction, see Richard B. Gaffin, “Union with Christ: Some Biblical and Theological Reflections” in *Always Reforming*, ed. A. T. B. McGowan (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 275.

be united to Christ inevitably means that we will be and will work to become one with his people (John 17:20-23).

5. But it goes even deeper than that. To be united to Christ means that believers participate in the deepest relationship of love with God (John 17:26). 1 Corinthians 6:17 says that he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Our very life comes from him. This mutual indwelling does not make us lose our personal identity. The Father and the Son are one (John 10:30), yet they are distinct. Similarly, every believer is one with the Son spiritually, yet does not become merged with the Son in essence or person. Just as the Father dwells in the Son and does his works (John 14:10), so the Son dwells in believers and does his works. To be united with Christ means that the Son is at work in and through us by his Spirit. In other words, the whole point of our creation and existence comes to fruition in Christ (John 17:3; Rev 21:3).
6. Significantly for our understanding of the ordinances, in John 14:20 Jesus states that in that day his disciples will know that he is “in” his Father, his disciples are “in” him, and he is “in” his disciples (cf. 17:21, 23). Clearly this “in” relationship is not in and of itself a spatial, bodily relationship. The Father has no body, yet Jesus indwells him. Thus we should not think that the indwelling described here necessitates a spatial, embodied relationship. *At the same time*, because God made us embodied creatures, there is necessarily some kind of spatial relationship involved when the Spirit is “in” us (1 Cor 6:19). Our bodies, and what we do with them, are not accidental to our relationship with Christ. Jesus had to be made like us in every respect, including being flesh and blood (Heb 2:14-18), in order to redeem us. The salvation he provides unites even our bodies with him (1 Cor 6:14-15), and he will raise our bodies from the dead as spiritual bodies (1 Cor 15:35-49; Rom 8:23).
7. Furthermore, the Spirit’s indwelling relationship is not only individual but is also corporate (1 Cor 3:16-17; Eph 2:21-22). It is not something that is merely “in your heart.” Although indwelling is a personal relationship, it is not a private one. It is inherently public. It is something that works itself out in all the dynamics of the body of Christ. God dwells in his temple, the church, by his Spirit. Christ, the head, gives life to his church by his Spirit. Thus our union with Christ is not just between the individual and Christ; it is also between Christ and *all* who believe in him. To be united to Christ is to be united to his body, the church. And his body is not just some immaterial blob out there somewhere to which I am connected in my thoughts. It is real redeemed people in real relationships of covenant love with one another, structured and operating according to Scripture, expressing here and now the eschatological congregation gathered in glory. The church emerges when there is communion with the Trinity.

I hope it is evident by now that physical, external actions are in no way contrary to or incompatible with spiritual union with Christ. In fact, as physical beings, there is no way for us to participate in our union with Christ apart from physical means. This whole discussion of baptism and the Lord’s Supper has been clouded for too long by false

dilemmas between inner and outer, internal and external, nature and grace, spiritual and physical. Robert Letham says, “Union with Christ comes to expression in, and is cultivated by, the Word and sacraments.”<sup>3</sup> Aside from our standard Baptist concerns about the term “sacraments,” this is exactly right.

Seeing the ordinances as an aspect of the application of our union with Christ, we can then define them clearly. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are ceremonies which enact our union with Christ. Baptism is the symbolic ceremony of *initiation* into our union with Christ. The Lord’s Supper is the symbolic ceremony of *participation* in our union with Christ.

Given these definitions, we can now proceed to put forward a few propositions and practical consequences of baptism and the Lord’s Supper respectively. I have no intention of giving a complete exposition of the biblical teaching regarding the ordinances. That baptism is immersion in water, for example, is simply assumed here.<sup>4</sup> I do hope to be provocatively constructive in helping us to see why properly practicing baptism and the Lord’s Supper are indispensable to faithfully carrying out the mission of Christ in our churches. You may come to some different conclusions than I have in the way we practice these ordinances, but if I can challenge you to take them seriously, I will be satisfied.

## Baptism

Baptism is the ceremony which enacts our initiation into union with Christ. This will undoubtedly strike many Baptists as a sacramentarian thing to say, but I believe it strikes many as such because they are mired in mysticism or its kissing cousin, rationalism. As a public, corporate symbolic action entrusted by Christ to his church, baptism is properly called a rite or ceremony. In addition, “to enact” means to establish or act out, and this is precisely what takes place in baptism. Let’s look at what God says to see this definition born out, and then I will set forward some propositions on the basis of this exegesis.

After his resurrection, Jesus gave his disciples their marching orders as he sent them to accomplish his mission: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:18-20). This crucial text clearly makes baptism an indispensable aspect of the mission of

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<sup>3</sup> *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2011), 124.

<sup>4</sup> This has been amply defended historically by all Baptist theologians. On the definition of words with the βαπτ- root, see the recent historical research of Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), chapter 3. He concludes, “*Baptizo* meant to dip, usually a thorough submerging, but it also meant to overwhelm and so could be used whether the object was placed in an element (which was more common) or was overwhelmed by it (often in the metaphorical usages)...As will be seen, Christian sources maintained the basic meaning of the word. Pouring and sprinkling were distinct actions that were represented by different verbs, and this usage too continued in Christian sources. When the latter speak of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit or the sprinkling of blood, they do not use *baptizo* for these actions.”

Christ. Even if we had no further understanding of baptism than is provided by a surface reading of this text, we would still know that we must baptize because Christ instructed us to do so.

But can we glean more? I believe we can. In the first place, Christ clearly expected his disciples to know what he was talking about when he told them to baptize. This is because John the Baptist had already introduced baptism and its meaning, linking baptism with repentance in view of the coming kingdom of God. The Baptist predicted that the one coming after him would not only baptize in water, but would also baptize in “the Holy Spirit and fire”<sup>5</sup> (Matt 3:1-12; Mark 1:4-8; Luke 3:1-7). Jesus himself was baptized by John to fulfill all righteousness, taking on his role as the Servant of the Lord and identifying with his people who repent of their sins. Jesus also then incorporated baptism into his ministry by having his disciples baptize those who became his followers (John 3:22-24; 4:1-2). So, the foundations for the practice and meaning of baptism had been laid when Christ gave his commission.

When we look more carefully at the grammar of the Great Commission, “baptizing” is a participle which follows and depends upon the main imperative verb, “make disciples.” Although ‘baptizing’ is not a command in and of itself, it picks up a commanding tone from this verb. More importantly, it unpacks a bit of what is involved in making disciples.<sup>6</sup> Baptism is inherent in making disciples, just as swearing in is inherent in making public officials or making vows is inherent in getting married. Note well that it is impossible to omit baptism and still make disciples.

This is further reinforced by Christ’s instruction that baptism ought to be administered “into the name of” the Triune God. “Into the name of” is a standard phrase expressing fellowship with and allegiance to someone (Acts 8:16; 10:48; 19:5; cf. 1 Cor 1:13, 15).<sup>7</sup> It shows a commitment. There is a relationship established between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the one being baptized, which in this context is the relationship of a disciple to his master.

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony R. Cross notes that this saying is best seen as step parallelism “in which ‘the second strophe takes up the thought of the first strophe and advances the thought one additional step. As a result, the second line... is an additional, although related, statement that brings the entire saying to its climax and completion’” (citing R. H. Stein). He says, “This sees Jesus’ baptism in the Spirit as the climax/fulfillment of John’s baptism, not its antithesis” (“Spirit- and Water-Baptism” in *Dimensions of Baptism: Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross [New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002], 131).

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Wallace categorizes these participles as participles of means (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 645). G. R. Beasley-Murray adds important qualifiers in *Baptism in the New Testament*, reprint ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 89. R. T. France summarizes the meaning well when he writes that “...the two uncoordinated participles, ‘baptizing’ and ‘teaching,’... spell out the process of making disciples” (*The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 1115). Or as Craig Blomberg writes, “The truly subordinate participles in v. 19 explain what making disciples involves: ‘baptizing’ them and ‘teaching’ them obedience to all of Jesus’ commandments. The first of these will be a once-for-all, decisive initiation into Christian community. The second proves a perennially incomplete, life-long task” (*Matthew*, NAC 22 [Nashville: Broadman, 1992], 431).

<sup>7</sup> See Richard E. Averbeck, “The Focus of Baptism in the New Testament,” *Grace Theological Journal* 2.2 (Fall 1981):267-8; J. D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Kindle Location 2634). Kindle Edition.

We must also note in the Great Commission that the command to baptize is given to the apostles as representatives of the church. As Robert L. Saucy writes, “That this command was not for the apostles alone is evident in the concluding words of the commission. . . . The apostles did not live to the end of the age, but the church will exist until its [*sic*] Lord comes for her.”<sup>8</sup> Thus already we see that baptism is a church ordinance. On the basis of his authority as the risen Lord, Christ told his disciples to baptize those who are being made into disciples.

Following on the heels of this observation is another one, namely, that those who would become disciples submit to baptism; they do not baptize themselves. Baptism is an action which is done to people.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, baptism cannot be reduced to only the expression of what is in a person’s heart. Like marriage in civil society, baptism has a public meaning, and it involves three agents: God, the church, and the one receiving the baptism.

Already, just by carefully considering the Great Commission, the significance of baptism is emerging. We are now in a position to incorporate the teaching of the rest of the NT.

In the book of Acts, we see the Great Commission worked out in practice, and baptism is clearly a crucial component of making disciples. In Acts 1:5, Jesus indicated that the fulfillment of what John the Baptist prophesied was about to come to pass, and so it did on the day of Pentecost. On that day Peter preached a powerful sermon demonstrating that Jesus is both Lord and Christ. His audience, cut to the heart, asked, “What shall we do” to deal with our guilt for crucifying the Messiah? Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).<sup>10</sup> Peter evidently understood the Great Commission well, and he preached exactly what Christ commanded (cf. Luke 24:47). Just as with the baptism of John the Baptist, Christian baptism enacted repentance, and in that way it resulted in forgiveness of sins. There is no thought here of being baptized without repentance. That would have been completely foreign to the meaning of baptism as Peter understood it. On the other hand, neither is there here any concept of repentance without baptism. It would have been inconceivable, given the Great Commission of Christ, to consider someone a disciple who would not receive baptism. Robert Stein expresses it well:

“In general a person could not be converted to Christianity in the New Testament apart from baptism. When individuals in the first century heard ‘Repent and be baptized’ or ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus and be baptized,’ none of them thought, ‘Can I do the first but not the second?’ . . . To reject baptism was to reject the

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<sup>8</sup> *The Church in God’s Program* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 192.

<sup>9</sup> As R. H. Stein says, “Since Christian baptism is also not autobaptism (note the use of the passive voice in Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12-13, 16, 36, 38; etc.), there must be a third party in the conversion process, that is, the church” (“Baptism in Luke-Acts” in *Believer’s Baptism* [Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006], 55).

<sup>10</sup> The most plausible interpretation of this text is also the most straightforward – repentance and baptism result in forgiveness of sins. For a very accessible discussion of the interpretive options and why this is the best understanding, see Matt Waymeyer, *A Biblical Critique of Infant Baptism* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2008), 96-102.

gospel message preached by Peter, Paul, and the other apostles who spoke of the need of baptism. Divine provision was made for those who, like the thief on the cross, could not be baptized, but to refuse the community's baptism was the same as a rejection of the Christ whom the community preached. It involved a clear unwillingness to obey the gospel preached by the apostles."<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the book of Acts, we see that the apostles maintained a close connection between faith, repentance, baptism, the Holy Spirit, and becoming a disciple (e.g. 8:12-13, 36; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:15, 33; 18:8). Baptism followed immediately upon believing the gospel message. One text in particular exemplifies the close connections which the NT Christians saw between conversion and baptism. The apostle Paul recounted what Ananias said to him, "Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). The two central commands of this text are "get yourself baptized" and "have your sins washed away."<sup>12</sup> The text does not say that being baptized is the cause or basis of having sins washed away; to think this would be a serious theological error. Christ's atonement applied to us by the Spirit is what effectively cleanses us from sin (Heb 9:14; 1 John 1:7; Rev 7:14). Yet at the same time, Ananias had no problem speaking of baptism in the same breath with this cleansing. This is because baptism is the symbolic enactment of the cleansing Christ's blood provides. This tight connection between baptism and becoming a Christian is further reinforced by what Ananias told Paul to do simultaneously with baptism – he was to call upon the name of the Lord (cf. Rom 10:9). James D. G. Dunn rightly comments, "In short, Paul did not become a Christian...until he ἐπικαλέσεται τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ [called upon his name]. The Pauline baptismal references (Rom. 6.4; Col. 2.12) reflect a very personal and profound experience and imply that for himself Paul's own baptism was the means of his commitment to Christ..."<sup>13</sup>

This leads us to consider Paul's teaching on baptism by briefly noting several important texts: Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:11-12; 1 Corinthians 1:13-17; and 1 Corinthians 12:13

In Romans 6, God says that we who are justified by faith in Christ cannot go on living in sin because we have died to sin. How is it that we died to sin? The answer is simply that Christ died to sin and rose again to new life, and we are united with him. Since we are united to Christ, we die to sin with him and rise again with him to walk in new life. This is the main point of the text. Fascinatingly, however, Paul appeals to the believers' common experience of water baptism to demonstrate the truth of his thesis.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> "Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2.1 (Spring 1998), 15.

<sup>12</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, revised ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 418, fn 22.

<sup>13</sup> Dunn, J. D. G. (2011-08-22). *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Kindle Locations 1828-1834). Kindle Edition.

<sup>14</sup> Dunn can be taken as representative of those who assume that Spirit baptism and water baptism are mutually exclusive. However, there is nothing in the context which would indicate that the text is not talking about water baptism, *unless* we read the text with the prejudice that water baptism has *nothing* to do with union with Christ. But reading the text this way is eisegesis, importing our preconceived notions into the text. Douglas Moo is much more in line with the actual text when he comments, "Paul's reference is to the Roman Christians' water baptism as their outward initiation into Christian existence. To be sure, a few scholars have denied any reference to water baptism here....But, without discounting the possibility of

All who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been buried with Christ by baptism. Why does he do this? Precisely because baptism is the climax of conversion, the believer's expression of faith and repentance, and God's expression of union with Christ in the Spirit. Because faith, repentance, the Holy Spirit, and becoming a disciple have a nexus point at baptism, baptism can be used as a synecdoche (i.e. a part representing the whole) of conversion.<sup>15</sup> In this way, baptism is the symbolic (ceremonial) initiation of our union with Christ.

Just to be very clear, this is not to say that baptism is the effective agent which unites us to Christ. The Holy Spirit unites us to Christ, and the instrument that he uses is faith. Nevertheless, baptism is the Christ-ordained means of acting out that faith in its public aspect.

Galatians 3:27 says essentially the same thing. The context demonstrates that all who are united to Christ by faith are the true sons of Abraham. This verse in particular provides a brief explanation of verse 26, which in turn is explaining verse 25. Verse 26 says that all who are in Christ are sons of God through faith. Verse 27 expounds a bit on being "in Christ." How is it that we have been united to Christ which makes us adult sons of God? We "were baptized into Christ," which is also described as "putting on Christ." Clearly, Paul is not shoeorning some kind of salvation by works into the middle of his great teaching on justification only by faith. Why then does he speak of baptism? Baptism is the symbolic enacting of our union with Christ.

One other important text along these lines is Colossians 2:11-12. As in Romans 6 and Galatians 3, baptism is not the primary issue. It is used in a supporting manner to the main argument. In this text, Paul continues his theme of the complete sufficiency of Christ by noting that believers participate in Christ's death and resurrection "in baptism."<sup>16</sup> Because believers are united to Christ, they were circumcised by God himself in Christ's circumcision, which is to say, in Christ's death (cf. Col 1:22).<sup>17</sup> This is true because all believers have been buried and raised with Christ in baptism. The objective work of Christ is applied to his people. Yet we also see the subjective response

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allusions to one or more of these ideas, a reference to water baptism is primary. By the date of Romans, 'baptize' had become almost a technical expression for the rite of Christian initiation in water, and this is surely the meaning the Roman Christians would have given the word" (*The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 359). Thomas Schreiner is correct, then, to say, "We are asking the wrong question, therefore, if we ask whether Spirit or water baptism is in view in Rom 6:3-4. Other Pauline texts suggest that water baptism and reception of the Spirit occurred at conversion. In my judgment Paul would have been initially puzzled if we asked him, 'Do you mean Spirit or water baptism in these verses?' He would reply, when he understood the question, 'Both'" ("Baptism in the Epistles" in *Believer's Baptism* [Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006], 74).

<sup>15</sup> Cross advocates the term "synecdoche" ("Spirit- and Water-Baptism," 147). A. H. Strong recognizes the same phenomenon: "...in Scripture language, a single part of a complex action, and even that part of it which is most obvious to the senses, is often mentioned for the whole of it, and thus, in this case, the whole of the solemn transaction is designated by the external symbol" (*Systematic Theology* [Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1907], 946). I would simply note that Strong's word "external" is superfluous and potentially misleading.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the interpretation of this text, see Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, WBC (Nashville: Word, 1982), 114-21; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 152-60.

<sup>17</sup> Note well that baptism is not a NT parallel to OT circumcision in this text. God circumcised these NT believers by Christ's death ("the circumcision of Christ"), not by baptism.

mentioned in this text. As is always true in the NT, Paul does not conceive of baptism apart from faith, for he specifies that believers were raised in baptism through faith.

1 Corinthians 1:13-17 contributes to our understanding of baptism in two ways. First, it makes clear what the phrase “into the name of” means. Secondly, it makes clear the priority of preaching the gospel in relation to baptism. Baptism always follows the proclamation of the gospel and depends upon it. Paul’s point here is not to minimize baptism.<sup>18</sup> It is rather to show that the divisions of the Corinthians were absurd.

Another text which adds to what we know of baptism is 1 Corinthians 12:13. This text explains how the body is one (v. 12) by saying, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” In this text we have both the spiritual power and the spiritual action performed which result in the body of Christ. An expanded paraphrase of the text helps to make this clear: “For in the realm of one Spirit we were all immersed so that we become one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we have all experienced the one Spirit.” The point of the text is to emphasize the unity that all the diverse members of the body of Christ share (cf. Eph 4:1-6). Christ baptizes his people in one Spirit which makes them his body. Union with Christ means union with his body, as it is manifested in particular congregations (cf. 1 Cor 12:27).

As we noted earlier, baptism is done to people, and this text implies that Christ is the one who does the baptizing.<sup>19</sup> Christ immerses people into the realm of the Spirit. As we have seen, baptism always implies repentance and faith on the part of the one being baptized. The baptizand is active in baptism; he cannot be a passive and inert recipient. Yet baptism is not primarily his action. It is the work of Christ.

Furthermore, *all* the members of the body have been baptized by Christ. The idea of an unbaptized believer is completely foreign to the NT. This is underscored by the way Paul appeals to “one baptism” as an indication of the unity of the church in Ephesians 4:5.

We must consider one more significant text on baptism, Peter’s famous statement that “baptism now saves you” in 1 Peter 3:21. In this text Peter explained that baptism is an antitype of the waters of the flood. In the days of Noah, God judged the wicked world, but he saved his people through water. But “now” (in the time since Jesus has come) baptism performs this function or carries this meaning. Whereas Noah and family were saved “through water,” baptism now saves us “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Again we see that baptism has to do with our union with Christ in his death and resurrection.

Peter uses two clauses which are in apposition to baptism, that is, they further define or describe baptism. The first one tells us what is not taking place in baptism – it is

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<sup>18</sup> Rightly Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 63.

<sup>19</sup> As Thomas Schreiner says, “Some have suggested that the Spirit is the one who does the baptizing, but if we look at the parallel passages in the NT, the element into which one is baptized is always communicated by the preposition “in” (*en*), whether the element into which one is plunged is water or the Holy Spirit (see Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16)” (“Baptism in the Epistles,” 72). Daniel Wallace argues that the preposition *ἐν* is used for means, meaning that “the Holy Spirit is the instrument that Christ uses to baptize” (*Greek Grammar*, 374). This is possible but less likely.

not a removal of dirt from the flesh, while the second positively states what is taking place in baptism. It is an appeal to God for a good conscience (cf. Acts 22:16).<sup>20</sup>

It is clear from this text that Peter does not ascribe any intrinsic power to baptism. He states that baptism saves through the resurrection of Jesus. It is the resurrection which makes baptism meaningful. There is no magic in the rite. At the same time, this text forbids any kind of mysticism or its secular cousin rationalism. Mysticism holds that the soul relates directly to God without anything material. The rationalist believes that the universe operates according to impersonal laws so that the physical has nothing to do with the spiritual. Both of these views damage the real meaning of baptism, such as Peter puts forward in this text. The mystic/rationalist cannot say the words of this text without turning slightly red and rushing to explain them away, because they clash violently with his worldview. In his worldview, baptism becomes a sort of religious ritual that we do because God says to do it, but it is basically optional. But this is not the way Peter speaks. He states without clearing his throat that baptism now saves you.

In the NT, baptism is intrinsically connected with conversion because baptism is an appeal to God for a good conscience. The inner and outer are kept together. Magic denies the inner aspect of faith that is necessary for biblical baptism. Mysticism denies the outer aspect that is necessary. The biblical teaching keeps them all together and in their proper order—God’s grace produces faith which is confessed in baptism. Baptism is the crowning moment of conversion and can properly be used to speak of the entirety of conversion-initiation. Seen in this light, it is natural to say “Baptism now saves you” without any hint of works salvation.

### *Three Propositions on Baptism*

On the basis of what God says about baptism, I submit three truths regarding baptism that I believe are crucial in our day.

First, baptism is *both* God’s act toward man and man’s response toward God. Baptism is short-changed if we forget that God applies baptism to us (via his authorized agents, the church – Matt 28:18-20). It is not merely a human action. At the same time, baptism is distorted if we forget that it instantiates man’s response of faith and repentance toward God. It is calling on the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16). It is appealing to God for a good conscience (1 Pet 3:21). It is identifying ourselves with Christ.

Second, baptism is a necessary component of fulfilling the Great Commission. Without baptism, we cannot make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Third, baptism is necessary to building the church of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:41). Without baptism, we do not have a church.

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<sup>20</sup> Or possibly a pledge to God to maintain a good conscience. For the former view, see Thomas Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), and for the latter, see Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

### *Four Applications for Baptism*

First, baptism must be administered by the church, which is to say, by particular churches. Each local assembly which is a true church is an expression of the body of Christ at that time and place, and no other person or institution is authorized by Christ to administer baptism. Baptism should not be administered by grandpa in the backyard pool or by Joe counselor at the local Christian camp. To do so risks making baptism a merely human act that God has not authorized, on the one hand, and on the other hand it fails to unite the one baptized with any real expression of the body of Christ. This is not to say that valid baptism can only be performed by an ordained pastor. The important thing is not the particular person who does the baptizing, but that the baptizing be an action of the church representing Christ. It is generally wise to have someone baptize who is publically recognized to represent the church.

Second, baptism ought to be administered to believers as the capstone of conversion. Baptism clearly ought to be administered to believers, for as we have seen, baptism in the NT always includes faith. But more controversially, I urge that baptism should be administered as a capstone of conversion. This is a great test case for whether our experience or our theology will drive our practice. Out of fear of false conversions, some earnest and godly pastors advocate delaying baptism until a professing believer has time to show fruits of conversion. However, I believe this is a mistake. It goes against both the theology and the examples of baptism we have in the NT.

For example, Mark Dever argues that “with an understanding of the baptism of believers, the paramount question becomes, ‘Is this person a publicly demonstrable believer?’”<sup>21</sup> But this question misses the mark. I would argue that in the NT, baptism is the public demonstration that one is a believer. Strangely, proponents of this position would never say that someone ought not to “call upon the name of the Lord” until he is demonstrably a believer, because we recognize that calling on the name of the Lord is the expression of faith. So it is with baptism. The person becomes a publicly demonstrable believer through baptism. While I agree entirely that care must be taken not to rush people into the tank (similar to the concern not to get people to “pray the prayer”), we begin to replace God’s revelation with man’s wisdom when we separate what is *always* together in the Scripture – conversion and baptism. It reveals a distorted view of baptism when we are afraid to apply it like God said.

Third, baptism ought to be the entry point into church membership. While there may be highly unusual situations in which one may be baptized but not immediately added to the membership of the local church, this would be theologically anomalous. Christ baptizes people into the realm of the Spirit so that they will be members of his body, and as 1 Corinthians 12 demonstrates, that body is expressed in particular assemblies.

Fourth, baptism ought to be practiced along with watchful and loving church discipline. Without church discipline, baptism will degenerate. In fact, the proper practice of church discipline is what will enable us keep baptism, conversion, and church membership together without fear.

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<sup>21</sup> “Baptism in the Context of the Local Church” in *Believer’s Baptism*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 344.

## The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is the ceremony which enacts our participation in union with Christ. Jesus said, "*Do this* in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24). The Supper is publicly and corporately acting out our remembrance of Christ. Allen Ross says, "But the expression includes more than a simple remembering. The idea of a memorial had been introduced in the ritual of Israel's sacrifices with the term *'azkarah* (s.v. *zakar*, 'to remember'). For example, a portion of the dedication offering (Lev 2) was burnt on the altar as a token memorial. This gift (*minkhah*) always followed the atoning sacrifice (Lev 1), indicating that gratitude and dedication are the proper responses to atonement. But the word *'azkarah* includes the meaning of acting on what is remembered."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, "enact" is a good description which captures the active essence of what is going on in the Lord's Supper. Once again, let's look at what God says to understand this definition, and then I will set forward more propositions and applications.

The synoptic Gospels all record Jesus' institution of the Supper at his final Passover meal with his disciples (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-23). Just as with baptism, it is obvious on the surface of the text that we ought to partake of the Supper in obedience to Jesus' command. But can we glean more? What do we do in the Supper that we would not otherwise do?

As the one who fulfills the OT, Jesus takes the Passover and transforms it in light of his finished work of redemption which established the new covenant. The Lord's Supper is extraordinarily rich in meaning. It has its roots in the OT anticipation of table fellowship with God, demonstrating a peaceful, life-giving covenant relationship with him (Exod 24:9-11). In Israel's sacrificial system, the peace offerings included eating a meal, showing that the Lord accepted the offerer as his friend (Lev 7:11-36). The tithes brought to the Temple were eaten "before the Lord" with rejoicing (Deut 14:22-27). Isaiah prophesied that the Lord would host a feast of rich food and well-aged wine for all people on his mountain in his kingdom (25:6). So when Jesus took the Passover meal and transformed it into his Supper, he said he would not drink again of the fruit of the vine until "I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14:25).

Jesus changed the Passover into his Supper by relating it directly to his death as a sacrifice. Just as God delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt through the exodus, so he also provided redemption from sin through the death of Jesus on behalf of his people. He spared them from judgment, brought judgment on all false gods, and set his people free. Just as God set Israel apart from Egypt and brought her to himself through the Passover, so Jesus fully and finally does this through his cross. All that the Passover represented as a shadow, Jesus fulfilled as the substance. Jesus' atoning death is the centerpiece of the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

Jesus also changed the Passover into his Supper by changing it from an old covenant focus to a new covenant focus. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus implemented the new covenant (cf. Heb 7-10). This covenant is the basis of our relationship with God. It is evident from Jesus' words of institution that partaking of the Supper is the central symbolic expression of our participation in this covenant.

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<sup>22</sup> *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 399; cf. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s.v. זָכַר.

The Gospel of John does not record Jesus' words of institution, but it does have one text which figures prominently in our understanding of the meaning of Christ's words. In John 6, Jesus says that he is the bread of life, and he promises "If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." In response to the Jewish unbelief, Jesus made his claim even more emphatic, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." The striking similarities to the Lord's Supper have prompted many to say that Jesus is talking about the Supper. However, the immediate context demonstrates that eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood is metaphorical for believing in him (vv. 35, 40). Jesus is not directly telling people to partake of the Lord's Supper in this text.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that there are no allusions to the Supper in John 6. Jesus' teaching in this text can help us to see the Supper aright. D. A. Carson is correct to say, "John 6 does not directly speak of the eucharist; it does expose the true meaning of the Lord's supper as clearly as any passage in Scripture."<sup>23</sup> The symbolic actions of eating and drinking in the Lord's Supper have objective significance by virtue of Jesus' sacrificial death, and they have subjective significance by virtue of faith. Ralph Martin says of John 6, "His work does not avail unless it is received, even as food does not nourish until it is assimilated and made part of our very life. His atonement *for us*... must be complemented by His work *in us*...."<sup>24</sup> We partake of the bread and cup because we trust in Christ's death on our behalf.

The church in the book of Acts considered the Lord's Supper something that was tremendously significant to the practice of their faith, for the believers joyfully devoted themselves to it, even on a daily basis (Acts 2:42, 46), and met to break bread on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). While it is true that "to break bread" is not a technical term for the Lord's Supper,<sup>25</sup> both the immediate contexts and the theological connections (e.g. Luke 22:19; 24:30) make it highly likely that the Lord's Supper was celebrated in the context of a fellowship meal.<sup>26</sup> Partaking of the Lord's Supper was a central part of their fellowship. It was *characteristic* of the new church, basking in the resurrected Christ's outpouring of the Spirit, to constantly partake of the Lord's Supper. It is striking that these Christians regularly met on the first day of the week specifically so they could share the Lord's Supper together. It was a community defining practice, showing their corporate fellowship with the risen Christ.

All of these ideas connected with the Supper are given clear expression in 1 Corinthians, where the apostle Paul had to deal with severe failures regarding the Supper. Paul first brought up the Supper in the context of church discipline (1 Cor 5:11). Anyone who is called a brother but engages in immoral behavior must be removed from the Christian community. Those who are outside the church are not in the sphere of the

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<sup>23</sup> *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 298.

<sup>24</sup> *Worship in the Early Church*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 118.

<sup>25</sup> David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 155-7.

<sup>26</sup> Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 216.

church's jurisdiction. Those who are inside the church are in the sphere of the church's jurisdiction, and the church is responsible to "purge out the evil person." Significantly for our discussion, this includes not even eating with such a person. Though this is broader than the Lord's Supper, it certainly includes it.<sup>27</sup> The upshot of this is that the ones who participate in the Lord's Supper are considered to be a Christian, while those barred from the Supper are not. Church discipline excludes a person from the Lord's Supper.

Later in the letter, when dealing with food sacrificed to idols, Paul urged the Corinthians to flee from idolatry (10:14-22). He demonstrates the sensibleness of his command by appealing to what the Corinthians already knew about the Lord's Supper and then applying this knowledge to pagan idol feasts. The Corinthians understood that participating in the Supper meant participation in the body and blood of Christ. Paul does not take time to explain the details of how this participation takes place, although given all the controversies on exactly this point, we might wish he had. Nevertheless, the fact of participation is clear. This real participation is precisely what excludes participation in idol feasts. James Hamilton explains Paul argumentation in the following way.

*"Premise 1:* Paul explains in 1 Cor 10:16-17 that partaking of the cup and the bread at the Lord's Supper unites Christians in fellowship with Christ by partaking of His body and blood in the bread and cup.

*Premise 2:* Paul explains in 1 Cor 10:18-20 that the OT teaches that those who eat sacrifices partake in the altar, which means that those who eat food offered to idols fellowship with the demons to whom the idol meat was offered.

*Conclusion:* in 1 Cor 10:21-22, Paul concludes from these two premises that one cannot partake in the Table and cup with both Jesus and demons, because to do so is to provoke the Lord to jealousy and He cannot be overcome."<sup>28</sup>

One thing that is clear from this text is that the Lord's Supper is the ceremony of participation in our union with Christ. This is more than a mental exercise. If it were merely a mental exercise, then participating in idol feasts would be inconsequential. The Corinthians were convinced that "an idol had no real existence" (8:4), so why not participate in idol feasts? They needed to realize that the idol feasts involved real participation with demons, whether they thought they were worshiping demons or not. There was objective idol worship going on in those feasts, and they were completely incompatible with the worship of the Lord. Similarly, there is objective participation with Christ going on in the Lord's Supper.

At this point it might be wise to bring up the historical debates about *how* Christians participate with Christ in the Supper. There have been four primary views in the Western church. Roman Catholicism teaches transubstantiation, which is that the bread and wine become the actual body of Christ when the priest consecrates them. Lutheranism teaches what has been called "consubstantiation," that the real body of Christ is in, with, and under the elements. Reformed churches (following John Calvin)

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<sup>27</sup> David Garland's interpretation is typical, "Refusing to eat with fellow Christians guilty of such acts breaks all social ties with them as well as excludes them from the Lord's Supper" (*1 Corinthians*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003], 189).

<sup>28</sup> "The Lord's Supper in Paul" in *The Lord's Supper*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 75.

teach that Christ is spiritually, not bodily, present in the Lord's Supper. Ulrich Zwingli is identified with the memorial view which says that Christ is not present in the Supper, although he moved more toward a spiritual presence view in his later years. This view holds that the elements are signs, pure and simple, which help us to think about Christ. Baptists have historically held to either the third or the fourth view.

Given the depth and complexity of the issue, as well as the constraints of this presentation, it might not be wise to delve into the debate, but allow me to provoke your own study by offering a little interaction with Russell Moore. In *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*, Moore writes regarding the question of how believers participate with Christ in the Supper, "The apostle Paul does not intend to teach that the elements physically become Jesus' body and blood; nor does he intend to teach that believers are spiritually transported to the heavenly places to commune with Christ. Instead, it seems that the New Testament assumes that Christ is *always present* with his people (Matt 28:20), organically and mystically united to his church as a head is united to a body (Eph 5:23).<sup>29</sup> This is all true, but I wonder if this is sufficient. Of course Christ is always present with his people. But *how* do we commune with him? Is the Supper the same, in terms of communion with Christ, as weeding my garden? Is it the same as private prayer?

Moore goes on to say, "In the Supper, we experience the presence of Christ through the proclamation that Christ is united with his people, the church. We, through faith, confess the identity of the people of God and our union with the crucified Messiah...The Lord's Supper identifies the temple presence of God in his new sanctuary, the church."<sup>30</sup> It seems that Moore is saying that we commune with Christ in the Supper because it makes us know that Christ is present. We experience his presence *through* the proclamation. But 1 Corinthians 11:26 seems to indicate that the actions of eating and drinking in the Lord's Supper are the proclamation. Therefore, I think we can biblically strengthen Moore's statement by saying that our union with Christ is *manifested* in the enacted Supper. The symbolic actions themselves are the participation with Christ (1 Cor 10:16). We do not need to look for something "behind" the symbols. We simply need to realize that symbolic actions are the way creation works.<sup>31</sup> Partaking of the bread and cup are the actions Christ has given to us to participate with him. They represent the actions of God in history. Without this Supper, we would be deprived of the natural corporate expression of our union with Christ, just as a married couple separated

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<sup>29</sup> "Baptist View: Christ's Presence as Memorial" in *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 38-9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>31</sup> From creation we learn that *everything* is a symbol to a greater or lesser extent, and mankind is a symbol who is also a symbol-maker (for example, language, music, clothing, architecture). A symbol is anything which stands for more than itself, and we can't help but symbolize. Human society would be impossible without symbolizing. Symbols are particularly important for marking out a community and for participating in a community. Inclusion and exclusion are demonstrated by the symbols involved. Symbols are mankind conversing with himself before the face of God. In fact, humanity itself is impossible without symbolizing. From creation we also understand the fundamental Creator-creature distinction. Creation represents God, but it is not God. Creation must never be thought of as ultimate reality. This is why we must never invest symbols with the inherent life and attributes of God. Furthermore, God forbids us from worshiping him via any man-made symbol of him (Exod 20:4-6). The sign and the thing signified ought not to be confused.

by travel is deprived the natural expressions of their union. By Christ's own institution, this particular churchly act manifests or expresses his giving his body and blood for the life of his people and his people's reception of his body and blood.

Let us move back into shallower waters and continue looking at what God says about the Supper. The most extensive text dealing with the Lord's Supper occurs in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. This text provides indirect evidence of the continued association of church meetings with the Lord's Supper. Paul basically assumes that when they assembled as a church they would eat the Lord's Supper (11:17-20). His phrase in v. 25, "as often as you drink" implies a frequently repeated action.

The thought of the text can be laid out in four parts.

- A Vv. 17-22 – the problem: divisions at the Lord's Table
- B Vv. 23-26 – the tradition: remembrance of Christ, proclaiming his death
- B' Vv. 27-32 – "So then:" discern the Lord's body
- A' Vv. 33-34 – "So then:" wait for (receive) one another<sup>32</sup>

Two focal points of meaning for the Lord's Supper emerge from this text. First, it is a remembrance and proclamation of the death of Christ. Second, it is fellowship of his people in the unity of his body.

Remembrance of Christ, as we have already noted, is a dynamic act in which the participants relive the past, appropriating it to themselves in the present.<sup>33</sup> This is precisely what we do when we symbolically eat the Lord's body and drink the Lord's blood. To be very clear, we do not "perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross throughout the ages" in the Supper, as the Roman Catholic Church erroneously teaches.<sup>34</sup> Saucy perceptively states, "Rather than any sacrifice to God, the rite is totally concerned with the movement of grace from God to man which flows from the prior Godward sacrifice. ... The elements signify something that is done toward man."<sup>35</sup> We appropriate the death of Christ to ourselves, not by sacrificing Christ, but by proclaiming his death. In participating in this remembrance, we are actively proclaiming the Lord's death and presently sharing fellowship with him.

This proclamation also has a future significance, for we do it "until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). The Supper for us is a foretaste of the time when we will feast with Jesus in the kingdom of God (Mark 14:25; Luke 22:16).

The second focal point of meaning for the Lord's Supper is derived from the first. Because we participate with Christ, we also participate with all who are united to Christ.

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<sup>32</sup> Simplified from Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 532.

<sup>33</sup> Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, 218.

<sup>34</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1323 and following.

<sup>35</sup> Saucy, 220. I note here that "movement of grace" is perhaps not the best choice of words, potentially conveying the idea that grace is some kind of a fluid or "stuff" that God gives us. Rather, grace is God's personal favor demonstrated in freely giving of himself. I note this because it is one of the problems in a Roman Catholic conception of grace that has dogged sacramental discussions historically.

The Supper is an inherently social act; it is done by the body. By definition there is no such thing as private communion. Not only is it social, it is also churchly. In other words, it is practiced with the body of Christ as a church act (1 Cor 11:18) and is a corporate proclamation of the death of Christ (v. 26). By their divisions at the Supper between the “haves” and the “have-nots” the Corinthians were destroying the meaning of the Supper (v. 20). Their ungodly behavior connected with the Supper may reveal that some of them are not genuine believers (v. 19). This is such a serious issue that Paul states that those who eat and drink in an unworthy manner are actually guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord (v. 27). Eating and drinking in an unworthy manner means eating and drinking “without discerning the body” (v. 29), namely, the body of Christ.<sup>36</sup> In a clear contrast to 1 Corinthians 5, where believers must break fellowship with flagrant sinners, in this text believers must receive one another in the way they partake of the Supper. Once again, the Lord’s Supper is a dividing line between believers and unbelievers, between those who are living according to the gospel and those who are not.

### *Propositions on the Lord’s Supper*

First, the Lord’s Supper is both God’s provision for man and man’s participation with God. Jesus said, “This is my body which is *for you*.” We respond in faith and proclaim the Lord’s death. We must not forget either side of this symbolic action.

Second, the Lord’s Supper is an active participation in Christ. It is symbolic, to be sure, but it is symbolic like a handshake and not like a stop sign.

Third, the Lord’s Supper is the functional line of demarcation between those who are members of Christ’s body and those who are not.

### *Practicing the Lord’s Supper*

First, the Lord’s Supper ought to be administered by the church, which is to say, by particular churches. 1 Corinthians 11:18 says, “when you come together as a church.” When the believers met in homes to celebrate the Supper, these were not private, non-church gatherings. They were church meetings (Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7). The symbolism of the Lord’s Supper makes it inappropriate to practice privately, and the proper practice of the Supper makes it impossible to share apart from a church context.

It has become commonplace for individual believers or parachurch groups to partake of what they call communion. For example, a large organization near my home offers spiritual retreats, advertising, “The following are options to assist you in your retreat experience:

- A notebook with tools, quotes, and guidance on prayer
- A private lodging room and a peaceful meeting place with books you can borrow
  
- Trained facilitators leading morning and evening gatherings
- Morning worship and communion available at night

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<sup>36</sup> For a concise layout of alternative interpretations of this verse, see Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 552.

- Guidance in simple prayer, meditative prayer, prayer of adoration, and more
- Beautiful and inspiring grounds and trails, including a 6 station prayer journey.”<sup>37</sup>

There are any number of things wrong with this scenario. In it, the Lord’s Supper is reduced to a personal tool for experiencing God. It is completely severed from its context of rightly discerning the body. There is no one who can competently discern if the individual ought to be allowed to the Supper – no pastors who know this person and no fellow church members who live with this person and can see his life. There is no possibility of church discipline. Heretics can commune alongside genuine believers, saying by their actions that they are all one in Christ. This is the religious equivalent of shacking up, trying to have the benefits of marriage without the commitments, and it tears to shreds the very fabric of Christianity.

Second, the Lord’s Supper ought to be administered frequently. As you can see, everything we know about the pattern of the early church suggests that the Lord’s Supper was a regular and at least weekly practice. This should create in our minds a predisposition toward frequent and regular participation in the Lord’s Supper. This predisposition is strengthened into an intense desire and delight when we combine this primitive church pattern with the powerful meaning of the Lord’s Supper. If the Supper truly is participation in Christ, “feeding on Christ crucified and all the benefits of his death,”<sup>38</sup> and an invitation to commune with him by faith, then what believer would not want to do this when we meet together on the first day of the week?

Third, the Lord’s Supper ought to be practiced along with rigorous and loving church discipline. As we have seen, the Supper is the functional line of demarcation between those who are in the church and those who are outside of the church. This line can only be maintained by those who are willing to carry out biblical church discipline. As Russell Moore says, the church defines “the boundaries of communion at the table in terms of those who are in union with Christ.”<sup>39</sup>

Last, the Lord’s Supper ought to be “close” communion. In a nutshell, this means that it should be restricted to baptized church members. The only people who have a right to the Supper are those in union with Christ. Since those who are unbaptized or not church members cannot be publicly recognized as united to Christ, any church which admits them to the Supper is tearing down the spiritual meaning of the ordinance.

Some churches, agreeing with what has just been stated, practice closed communion, that is, only members of that particular church may partake of the Lord’s Supper. However, there is Scriptural evidence for allowing all to partake of the Supper who give credible evidence of following Christ by being a baptized member of a true church. Paul broke bread with the believers at Troas (Acts 20:7, 11), even though he was not from that community. Furthermore, every true church is united spiritually with every

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<sup>37</sup> <http://www.navigators.org/us/ministries/gleneyrie/retreats/innovospiritualretreat/innovo>. Accessed 22 April 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Second London Baptist Confession, 30.7.

<sup>39</sup> “Baptist View: Christ’s Presence as Memorial,” in *Understanding Four Views on the Lord’s Supper*, 40.

other true church, so that membership in one local church can be recognized as a legitimate admission to the Supper by another local church.

On the other hand, open communion, the practice of allowing anyone who thinks of himself as a Christian to commune, is popular in our day. For example, Henry C. Thiessen argues, “This is ‘the table of the Lord,’ not the church's table. This is evident from the fact that the individual is asked to examine himself as to his fitness to come to the table....”<sup>40</sup>

In reply, I note that this presents a false dilemma. The fact that it is the table of the Lord says nothing about what the church's role in administering the table might be. The fact that the individual is asked to examine himself as to his fitness means exactly that and nothing more. It says nothing about whether the church also has a responsibility in the matter.

Dr. Thiessen continues, “The church is not authorized to sit in judgment upon believers, except in the case of disorderly conduct, false teaching, or participation in unscriptural practices.”<sup>41</sup> Dr. Thiessen is technically correct in what he says, but in saying this, he actually undermines his argument. It is exactly right that the church has the authority to sit in judgment upon believers in the case of disorderly conduct, false teaching, or participation in unscriptural practices. Since it is scripturally out of order for a person to be given the public status of a believer without baptism (and its inseparable companion, church membership), then the church has the authority to bar an unbaptized person from the Lord's Table. In no way is the church exceeding its God-given jurisdiction by doing this. Instead, the church is using its God-given authority to make clear what discipleship is. In effect, the church that properly fences the Lord's Table is proclaiming the pure gospel to a world that is desperately confused as to what it means to be a follower of Christ.

A. H. Strong expressed well the major problems with open communion.

1. It assumes an unscriptural inequality between the two ordinances. The Lord's Supper holds no higher rank in Scripture than does Baptism. The obligation to commune is no more binding than the obligation to profess faith by being baptized. Open communion, however, treats baptism as if it were optional, while it insists upon communion as indispensable.
2. It tends to do away with baptism altogether. If the highest privilege of church membership may be enjoyed without baptism, baptism loses its place and importance as the initiatory ordinance of the church.
3. It tends to do away with all discipline. When Christians offend, the church must withdraw its fellowship from them. But upon the principle of open communion, such withdrawal is impossible, since the Lord's Supper, the highest expression of

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<sup>40</sup> *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 329.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

church fellowship, is open to every person who regards himself as a Christian.

4. It tends to do away with the visible church altogether. For no visible church is possible, unless some sign of membership be required, in addition to the signs of membership in the invisible church. Open communion logically leads to open church membership, and a church membership open to all, without reference to the qualifications required in Scripture, or without examination on the part of the church as to the existence of these qualifications in those who unite with it, is virtually an identification of the church with the world, and, without protest from Scripturally constituted bodies, would finally result in its actual extinction.<sup>42</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Dipping people in water, breaking and eating bread together, and drinking wine together are not incidental to the mission of Christ. They are ceremonial enactments of our union with Christ, personally and corporately. Though church growth gurus and big name ministries pay scant attention to them, they are crucial to faithful ministry. When we observe carefully what God says, we will offer to the world, not a spiritualized version of its own practices, but practices that redefine the world according to the gospel. Until Christ comes again, we must obey his commands to baptize and commune together.

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<sup>42</sup> *Systematic Theology*, 978-9.