

The Feast of Worship

John G. Paton, missionary to the New Hebrides, in describing the first Communion service on the Island of Aniwa on October 24, 1869: "The whole service occupied nearly three hours. The Islanders looked on with a wonder whose silence was almost painful to bear. Many were led to inquire carefully about everything they saw, so new and strange. For the first time the Dorcas Street Sabbath School Teachers' gift from South Melbourne Presbyterian Church was put to use—a new communion service of silver. They gave it in faith that we would require it, and in such we received it. And now the day had come and gone! For three years we had toiled and prayed and taught for this. At the moment when I put the bread and wine into those dark hands, once stained with the blood of cannibalism but now stretched out to receive and partake the emblems and seal of the Redeemer's love, I had a foretaste of the joy of glory that well-nigh broke my heart to pieces. I shall never taste a deeper bliss till I gaze on the glorified face of Jesus Himself."

The Lord's Supper has been a source of huge controversy among Christians for centuries. It was one of the major controversies of the Reformation period, the Roman Church believing that Christ's body is actually present in the elements, and the Protestants who disagreed. Even among Protestants, there was disagreement: is it nothing more than a memorial, or is Christ present spiritually? Does the Lord's Supper actually communicate some gift or some grace from God? Does it work apart from faith, or does it require faith? Who is to partake? Should communion be open or closed? How often should it be celebrated – weekly, monthly, quarterly, or even one or twice a year? Should we use one cup or many? Unleavened bread or regular? Should the elders and deacons serve, or should the members come up and partake? Should the minister stand in front of or behind? Should children partake or not?

Now before you dismiss all this as petty and unimportant, understand that controversy only arises when people regard something as important. Nearly all Christians, across the board, have understood the importance of the Lord's Supper. We debate over details when every detail matters to us.

We would do well to regard the Lord's Supper with great reverence and to give it our careful study. In the next few weeks, I intend for us to study the Lord's Supper from different angles. We'll consider it as a feast of worship, a meal of fellowship, an oath of discipleship.

The Lord's Supper is first, and foremost, a feast of worship. In some ways, it may be how our worship consummates and comes to its high point. While the Word of God is central in our worship, we might say that the Lord's Supper is its climax, its high point. When you think of corporate worship, you should think of reading the Word, praying the Word, singing the Word, the preaching of the Word, but then it all comes to a focus-point, in the Lord's Supper.

Perhaps you have never thought of the Lord's Supper as a feast of worship. Let's begin by seeing how worship is connected to eating in Scripture. We know that 1 Corinthians 10:31 tells us to eat and drink and do all to the glory of God. But the Bible gets more specific, and includes eating and drinking in times of corporate or public worship.

Consider two very striking incidents.

Exodus 24:1 Now He said to Moses, "Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. ² "And Moses alone shall come near the LORD, but they shall not come near; nor shall the people go up with him." ³ So Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the judgments. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the

words which the LORD has said we will do." ⁴ And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD. And he rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ Then he sent young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. ⁶ And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar. ⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient." ⁸ And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, "This is the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words." ⁹ Then Moses went up, also Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, ¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. And there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity. ¹¹ But on the nobles of the children of Israel He did not lay His hand. So they saw God, and they ate and drank.

Here Israel's covenant with God is ratified and sealed. Once done. Moses, Aaron and his sons and seventy of Israel's leaders go up and they see God's manifested to their physical eyes. And then remarkably, what do they do? They eat and drink. This very mundane, ordinary, physical thing, is what these men do, having seen God's glory. And there is no sign that they did wrong. Instead, it seems to be the fitting end. As a meal so often concludes important meetings, gatherings, conferences, so God concludes this sealing of the covenant with Israel, with a meal. God, as it were, invites them to meal.

Consider another scene. Within the Tabernacle or Temple itself there was food – the shewbread, or the Bread of the Presence.

Leviticus 24:1-9 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ² "Command the children of Israel that they bring to you pure oil of pressed olives for the light, to make the lamps burn continually. ³ "Outside the veil of the Testimony, in the tabernacle of meeting, Aaron shall be in charge of it from evening until morning before the LORD continually; it shall be a statute forever in your generations. ⁴ "He shall be in charge of the lamps on the pure gold lampstand before the LORD continually. ⁵ "And you shall take fine flour and bake twelve cakes with it. Two-tenths of an ephah shall be in each cake. ⁶ "You shall set them in two rows, six in a row, on the pure gold table before the LORD. ⁷ "And you shall put pure frankincense on each row, that it may be on the bread for a memorial, an offering made by fire to the LORD. ⁸ "Every Sabbath he shall set it in order before the LORD continually, being taken from the children of Israel by an everlasting covenant. ⁹ "And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place; for it is most holy to him from the offerings of the LORD made by fire, by a perpetual statute."

Here were these loaves of bread that were always kept in God's presence. They were eaten by the priests, again, in God's presence. It was as if the symbol was, once you have been cleansed outside by the burnt offering, and at the laver, you can come in, and by the light of the golden candlestick, commune with me. Eat with me, in my holy presence.

Of all the offerings brought to the Tabernacle or Temple, only one was completely burnt up – the burnt offering. The peace offering was eaten partly by the priests, and partly by the offerer and his family. The sin offering would be eaten by the priests. The guilt offering was eaten by the priests. The food and drink offerings were partly burnt up and partly eaten by the priests.

On the various feast days – Pentecost, Trumpets, Atonement, Tabernacles, there were all sorts of combinations of burnt offerings, sin offerings, food offerings. It's as if God wanted to emphasize that worship is crowned off with a meal. From the assurance of pardon and the reconciliation provided by the blood, there is now a meal.

Now we could list other events – Abraham and Melchisedek, Abraham's meal for Yahweh and the two angels that visited him. In fact, even pagan religions associated some kind of eating and feasting with their meals. Israel did it before the Golden Calf. The Canaanites used to feast on their high places, and the Moabites seduced the Israelites to come and eat of their sacrifices. Into the

New Testament, and a major issue becomes the food offered to idols, whether Christians can eat of it or not.

Why should eating be the high-point of worship? Why should eating even be associated with worship? Well let's answer that by considering what we do when we eat, and what happens when we worship.

What happens during a shared meal? We enjoy one another's presence. Like no other time, we come to know one another. This is the place we always turn to to really get to know each other. When a young man is interested in learning more about a young lady, he does not invite her to a hunting expedition, or to help him paint his house, he asks her to coffee or to a meal.

Why is this so? To eat together is to be vulnerable and open. We are sharing life with each other, are we not? Beyond that, we are sharing pleasure with each other. We are pleasing each other but also sustaining each other. It is an act of service, but also an act of deep shared joys. It is life and love, in one.

Now consider what worship is. Worship is knowing God, and responding to His beauty with ultimate love. You see His worth, and you express your admiration, your awe, your enjoyment of God in acts of praise, and devotion, and dependence.

In a meal, I sit down with someone, and through that shared experience of life and love, I come to know him better, and enjoy him more. In worship I know and love God through communing with Him, and I come to enjoy Him all the more.

At the Lord's Table, these two come together. We come to know Him, and enjoy Him like no other time. We literally eat a meal with Him. We come to know Him like we would someone else we shared a meal with. We enjoy life and love with Him.

Eating is in some ways how worship reaches its pinnacle. Think about how worship progresses. We are called to worship, we call on God to assist us in prayer. We then sing His praises in song, and begin to reflect on Scripture as it is read. We sing those truths, be they gladness, confession, thanksgiving, consecration. We then pray, adoring, confessing, thanking, requestion. We then hear the Word preached, which is the fullest unveiling of God's majesty before us. We see, and respond with faith. What might be the consummation of this seeing God's splendour? The answer is, to commune with Him. To be in His presence, and by faith exemplifying outwardly and physically what is true inwardly and invisibly, that we are joined to Christ, that we one with Christ. We love Him, feast on Him, live on Him, lean on Him. He is our life and love.

Let me suggest to you four ways that the Lord's Table is truly a feast of worship, and should be the highpoint of our worship.

I. It is Grace-Given Meal

1 Corinthians 11:20 ²⁰ *Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper.*

We sit down at God's Table. It is the Lord's Table. In fact, the Greek construction here of the word *Lord's* is found in only one other place in the New Testament – Revelation 1:10, where it speaks of the Lord's *Day*. This is something uniquely belonging to the Lord. It is His Table. We are not the hosts, and He the guest. No, He is the host, and we the guests. He provides the food, food which is some of the simplest and sweetest to the tastebuds of people around the world – bread and the fruit

of the vine.

Have you ever considered how often God has invited us to eat with Him? In Eden we were invited to walk with Him in the cool of the day, no doubt, picking of some fruit along the way was a natural part of those walks. We've already seen God's invitation to Israel to eat with Him. In Revelation 3, the Lord calls on the church at Laodicea to open the door to His knocking so that He can come in and sup with them, and they with Him. Jesus speaks of eating together in His kingdom at His invitation.

What all this reminds us of is that this all takes place at God's initiative, by God's mercy. We come to this Table not because we invited ourselves – something we all consider rude in human relationships. This is a feast of worship because worship begins with grace. God pursues us. God calls us. God opens our eyes. God reveals Himself. We are guests, and our hearts respond with gratitude, wonder and awe.

While all our hearts and all our songs
Join to admire the feast,
Each of us cry, with thankful tongues,
“Lord, why was I a guest?

“Why was I made to hear Thy voice,
And enter while there's room,
When thousands make a wretched choice,
And rather starve than come?”

'Twas the same love that spread the feast
That sweetly forced us in;
Else we had still refused to taste,
And perished in our sin.

If God did not graciously pursue us and show Himself to us, there would be no worship. This is a feast of worship, because it is the Lord's Table – a table of grace.

But in inviting us to this meal, God invites us to do far more than eat and drink physically. He tells us that this physical meal pictures something. It represents something. These symbols centre around someone and His work.

II. It is a Christ-Centred Meal

1 Corinthians 11:23-25 ²³ For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; ²⁴ and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." ²⁵ In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."

At this meal the focus is on one Person. The discussion is about one Person and His deeds. Where are all eyes around the Table? They are on Christ. We do it in remembrance of Christ, and the elements show us Christ. The bread represents His broken body, the cup represents His life's blood. Both of them remind us that the God-Man gave His life as our substitute, so that we could live. This is a meal centered around Christ and His cross.

And that's what real Christian worship does. It is Christ-centred. God the Father has chosen to make His Son the focal point of revelation and worship. The Son reveals the Father, and so it is by looking on Christ, focusing on Christ that we see the glory of God in a human face. Someone has said that Jesus is God written in a language we can understand. Christian worship is now further along than the worship of the Old Testament, because in Christ we have a fullness of revelation that was not there before. This is a feast of worship because we are gazing on Christ, who reveals all the glory of the Triune God.

Colossians 2:9 ⁹ *For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily*

Someone says, I want to know God. Could there be a better way than to sit down to a meal with Jesus, the one who reveals God? That is what we do at the Lord's Table – we commune with Christ, by faith.

The Lord's Table is a feast of worship because it is Grace-Given and Christ-Centred. But it is worship for a third reason.

III. It is a Word-Saturated Meal

1 Corinthians 11:25-26 *This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.* ²⁶ *For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.*

We are told in this time to do this in **remembrance** of Christ. That is, we are to reflect on what our Lord has done on the cross. Where do we find accounts of what He did, and what it meant? We find it in Scripture.

We are told to **proclaim** this death until He comes. Where do we find out what to proclaim about His death? Where do we find out truth about His coming? In the Word.

We are told to examine ourselves before partaking. Against what standard are we to examine ourselves? The standard of the Word.

The Lord's Supper is a time for remembering, reflecting, examining ourselves and proclaiming His death from the Word. It is Word-saturated. Here is where so many historical celebration of the Lord's Table turned into something unbiblical. They were separated from the Word. But Christian worship is entirely a matter of responding to the God who reveals Himself in His Word. Christian worship is Word-Saturated. And so, at this feast, the conversation is about Jesus Christ, and the one who does most of the talking is the Holy Spirit, as we read and reflect on His Word.

Charles Spurgeon said, "Where, beloved, can we find richer instruction than at the table of our Lord? He who understands the mystery of incarnation and of substitution, is a master in Scriptural theology. There is more teaching in the Saviour's body and in the Saviour's blood than in all the world besides."

The saying goes, the Spirit of God, takes the Word of God and shows us the Son of God. This is why this is a feast of worship. Because we read, and reflect on Christ and His cross, and we examine ourselves and consider why He had to die on that cross, and we respond to Him,

Grace-given. Christ-centred. Word-saturated.

IV. It is a Faith-Nourishing Meal

What happens to us at the Lord's Table when we use our minds to remember Christ and His work, and then use our bodies to eat and drink? The answer is, our faith is nourished.

We tend to think of faith as a very non-physical thing. But think of what happens in worship. God calls on us as persons made in God's image, to use our bodies and minds to His glory. We are embodied people: when we sing, we make physical sounds with our tongues and vocal chords, we read using physical light on physical pages with our eyes, we pray and preach with our ears and mouth, and then God calls us to physically smell and taste and touch and eat. God is giving us an outward, tangible, physical symbol of inward, invisible realities. We, who are embodied creatures, receive a reliable outward witness, a sign and a seal, that we have truly participated in Christ.

And think of how intimate this is. When you eat, you take something that has died, so that you can keep on living. And here, we eat, not the literal body of Christ, but symbolically we are saying that we have participated in Christ, we have taken Him in. He died so that we might live. He is in us, and we are in Him. By faith, we have eaten His flesh and drunk His blood. Therefore, His life is now our life.

So what happens to us when we partake with faith? He fills the mind, sheds abroad His love in our hearts, communicates assurance of salvation to us, and we enjoy sweet communion with Him. He is in us, and we in Him.

Worship lives on faith, because we love Him whom we have not seen. And so this is a feast of worship, because it nourishes the faith that sees and loves God.

Before we think of it as fellowship, before we think of it as renewing our commitments, the Lord's Table is being invited to dinner at God's house, with God as the host. He invites, by grace, because He wants you to know Him. To know God is to know Him through Jesus Christ and His cross, so this is where the focus is. And to do so, the Spirit uses the Word to cause reflection, self-examination, rejoicing, anticipation. All of which grows our faith, causing us to more clearly see Him whom we love. A feast of worship. Which does raise the question – how often should we have this high-point of worship? More regularly or less regularly?

John Bunyan wrote a book expounding the verse John 6:37: *All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.*

The book is simply called, *Come, and Welcome to Jesus Christ*. That's really an appropriate thing to say at the Lord's Table. In coming, you are coming to Him, these symbols represent Him. It is an invitation to come. You are also welcome. Unless you are under the discipline of a biblical church, or if you have not professed faith in Christ publicly, this is for you. And if you have not, then this becomes an invitation – come and repent and receive Christ. Confess him with the mouth, and be baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.