

1689 CONFERENCE 2018

TALK #07

THE LORD'S SUPPER AS A MEANS OF GRACE¹

As a faithful Christian, what do you really and consciously expect to receive from God when you eat and drink at the Lord's Supper? Do you expect to receive Christ? Do you expect to receive His saving benefits?

We all confess together that we observe the Lord's Supper in remembrance of our Lord Jesus Christ. This teaching about remembering Him is explicit in His original directives about the ordinance. It is inescapable and undeniable. These words of institution are also heard from the minister each time the gathered church observes the Lord's Supper. Most often, the key passage in 1 Corinthians 11 is used.

For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the *same* night in which he was betrayed took bread: and when he had given thanks, he brake *it*, and said, take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also *he took* the cup, when he had supped, saying, this cup is the new-testament [*or, covenant*] in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink *it*, in remembrance of me (1 Cor 11.23–25).

Our Lord Jesus Christ doubles the phrase, "in remembrance of me." Thus He greatly emphasizes the importance of this spiritual discipline of remembering while the elements of the bread and the cup are in our hands and mouths. I believe that He does this because without our conscious, deliberate worship of Christ crucified in the ordinance, He would be grievously dishonored, we would commit sacrilege, and we could therefore expect His faithful discipline rather than a blessing. Positively, our reverent and joyful remembrance of Christ is in itself a blessing to us. We can all appreciate John Newton's hymnic praise of Christ in these words:

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds,
In a believer's ear.
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds
And drives away his fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole,
And calms the troubled breast;
'Tis manna to the hungry soul,
And to the weary, rest.²

But does God give us in the Lord's Supper more than the remembrance of Christ and the holy sweetness associated with that? Are there very particular spiritual blessings which, by the grace of God, Christians can anticipate from Him especially in connection with the gathered

¹ By D. Scott Meadows, Pastor, Calvary Baptist Church (Reformed) of Exeter, New Hampshire.

² John Newton, *Olney Hymns*, 1808, p. 50.

church's faithful and frequent practice of the Lord's Supper? Could it be that these are communicated to us spiritually through our trusting obedience to His command? I say emphatically and with conviction, "Yes!" My assertion that the Lord's Supper is a very special means of grace from God to believers reflects a long consensus among Christians, has solid support from Holy Scripture, and carries momentous and practical implications, both individually and ecclesiastically.

These three subtopics will occupy the rest of my lecture. First, we will hear the general and historical consensus of Christians upon the Lord's Supper as a means of grace, with special attention to the Second London Baptist Confession of 1677/89 (hereafter 2LCF) representing that broad theological tradition. Second, we will consider the biblical basis for the Christian consensus represented in our Reformed Baptist symbols, and see the doctrine confirmed by God's Word. Third, I would suggest a few examples of practical relevance that this biblical-confessional position has for today's believers and our churches. You can easily remember these parts of the lecture by three simple words: confession, confirmation, and custom.

I

Confession

Christians have together and abundantly confessed the Lord's Supper as a means of grace. This has been the general consensus of Christians through many centuries. This claim of mine both allows and implies that a minority of Christians have dissented. Depending upon your ecclesiastical context, you may be more familiar with the "Memorial View" or Memorialism. In our times it is commonly represented among low-church Evangelicals and perhaps most Baptists, but it has never been the predominant position on the Supper among Christians broadly or by a historical standard. The following summary is accurate and helpful.

Memorialism is the belief held by some Christian denominations that the elements of bread and wine (or juice) in the Eucharist (more often referred to as The Lord's Supper by memorialists) are purely symbolic representations of the body and blood of Jesus, the feast being established only or primarily as a commemorative ceremony. The term comes from Luke 22:19: "This do in memory of me" and the attendant interpretation that the Lord's Supper's chief purpose is to help the participant remember Jesus and his sacrifice on the Cross.

This viewpoint is commonly held by Anabaptists, the Plymouth Brethren segments of the Restoration Movement and some nondenominational churches, as well as those identifying with Liberal Christianity, but it is rejected by most branches of Christianity, including the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Oriental Orthodox Church, the Church of the East, Independent Catholic Churches, Lutherans, Presbyterians and other traditional Calvinists, as well as the vast majority of Anglicans and Methodists, who variously affirm the doctrine of the real presence.

The early Reformed theologian Huldrych Zwingli is commonly associated with Memorialism. In fact, Zwingli affirmed that Christ is truly (though not naturally)

present to the believer in the sacrament, but that the sacrament is not used instrumentally to communicate Christ, as John Calvin taught.³

The two positions represented by Zwingli and Calvin are our focus in this lecture. In “The Sixty-Seven Articles of Huldrych Zwingli” (1523), he wrote that “the mass is . . . a memorial of the sacrifice and a seal of the redemption which Christ manifested to us.”⁴ Zwingli so emphasized the memorial significance of the Lord’s Supper that the other spiritual benefits were diminished if not denied altogether. Yet even Zwingli confessed that “the body and blood of Christ” symbolized in the elements of the Lord’s Supper are “food for the soul.”⁵

Memorialism may be contrasted with the “spiritual presence of Christ” in the Lord’s Supper and the related concept of “the means of grace.” Calvin represents this position well. Historic Lutheranism concurs that the means of grace includes the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper (*Augsburg Confession* [1530], I.v.2).

The doctrine of Calvin concerning the Lord’s Supper as a means of grace is generally held by churches of the Protestant Reformation. The Belgic Confession of 1561, the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647, and our own 2LCF all plainly embrace it. At least one writer has wrongly stated⁶ that the latter advocates Memorialism because it says “this ordinance of Christ is . . . only a memorial” (30.2), but that is to twist language found in the context of denying it is “a real sacrifice,” as the Roman Catholic Church alleges. It does not negate the subsequent and explicit confessional language upon the Lord’s Supper as a means of grace. At best, overlooking this larger confessional context is an example of exceedingly poor scholarship. Further attention to the 2LCF reveals its agreement with Calvin’s doctrine, insisting that the Lord’s Supper is more than a memorial for those who use it rightly.

A general statement about the means of grace appears in 2LCF 14.1:

The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word; by which also, and by the administration of baptism and the Lord’s supper, prayer, and other means appointed of God, it is increased and strengthened.

This statement teaches that “the grace of faith,” that is, the gracious divine gift of our personal faith in Christ, “is increased and strengthened,” not only by “the ministry of the Word,” the primary means of edification, but also “by the administration of . . . the Lord’s Supper,”

³ Wikipedia, accessed 24 May 2018.

⁴ Article 18, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., RHB, Kindle location 271 of 55125.

⁵ “A Short Christian Instruction” [1523], Article 8, *ibid.*, Kindle location 824.

⁶ Nathan Finn cites Gregory Alan Thornbury: “In the Baptist tradition, the memorial view of the Lord’s Supper has been the majority position. The Second London Baptist Confession of 1689 deems the Lord’s Supper to be ‘only a memorial,’ although some Baptists have, of course, dissented from this point of view” (<http://www.nathanfinn.com/tag/memorial-view/> accessed 31 Aug 2018). Taken from *The Lord’s Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ Until He Comes* (editors Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford, B&H Academic, 2010, pp. 359–61).

among “other means appointed by God.” The Lord’s Supper is one of God’s instruments to increase and strengthen a Christian believer’s faith.

Now notice how that 2LCF elaborates several ways in which God makes the Lord’s Supper, in particular, an instrument of His grace to those who partake in a worthy manner.

First, Christ instituted the Lord’s Supper for the purpose of being a “confirmation of the faith of believers in all the benefits thereof” (2LCF 30.1). This “confirmation” of the Baptists is not the rite practiced in some denominations. The verb “confirm” originates from a compound of Latin words meaning “to strengthen together.” The sense in 2LCF seems to be to “establish the truth or correctness of (something previously believed to be the case).”⁷ Participation in the Lord’s Supper is designed by God to strengthen a believer’s assurance of inclusion in all the covenantal blessings of the gospel, which blessings are summarily comprehended in the biblical phrase, “eternal” or “everlasting life” (John 3.16).

A second benefit believers have through the Lord’s Supper is “[our] spiritual nourishment” (2LCF 30.1). As those alive in Christ, we have an ongoing need for spiritual sustenance, that we might remain spiritually alive, healthy, and strong. God makes the Lord’s Supper an instrument for preserving the spiritual life and vitality of Christian believers.

A third blessing through the Lord’s Supper for believers is “growth in [him]” (2LCF 30.1), that is, Christ. True Christians are exhorted by the New Testament to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3.17). Also, the whole church “grows with the increase that is from God” by “holding fast to the Head,” even Christ (Col 2.19). The Lord’s Supper is one means by which individuals and the church body grow spiritually.

Fourth, the Lord’s Supper also promotes our “further engagement in, and to all duties which [we] owe to him” (2LCF 30.1). Our experience of Christ’s love in connection with the Supper evokes in us a deeper commitment, resolve, and encouragement to serve our Lord and Savior in this ordinance and in all aspects of His revealed will, devoutly and perseveringly.

Fifth, the Lord Jesus instituted this ordinance “to be a bond and pledge of [our] communion with Him, and with each other” (2LCF 30.1). Many human cultures conceive of eating together as much more significant than a group of people attending to their dietary needs. Scripture teaches this, too. In the Lord’s Supper, Christ is both the spiritually-present Host and the symbolically-represented Feast. He Himself serves us and He serves us Himself. Partaking believers are His special guests who appropriate Him to ourselves by faith and obedience in the most profound spiritual unity with Him. The unity of the church in and with Christ is also displayed and experienced by the members of Christ’s household in our shared holy moments around His Table.

The next description in 2LCF of the Lord’s Supper as a means of grace says,

Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this ordinance, do then also inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but

⁷ *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2010, 2017), “confirm.”

spiritually receive, and feed upon Christ crucified, and all the benefits of His death; the body and blood of Christ being then not corporally or carnally, but spiritually present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses (2LCF 30.7).

The Baptist Catechism neatly gathers up elements from all this language of 2LCF into a statement for memorization.

Q. 102: What is the Lord's Supper?

A. The Lord's Supper is an ordinance of the New Testament, instituted by Jesus Christ; wherein by giving and receiving bread and wine, according to His appointment, His death is shown forth, and the worthy receivers are, not after a corporal and carnal manner, but by faith, made partakers of His body and blood, with all His benefits, to their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace.⁸

These confessional and catechetical statements are important not only for what they affirm but also for what they implicitly deny. They stand opposed to any *ex opere operato* sacramentalism, where the receiver is blessed without and apart from faith, as in Roman Catholic teaching. They also categorically reject, by the phrase “not corporally or carnally,” both Roman Catholic transubstantiation and consubstantiation, in favor of Christ's spiritual presence at and in the Supper. Positively, we have the affirmation here that “worthy receivers . . . inwardly by faith, really and indeed, . . . spiritually receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all the benefits of His death.” This is really the heart of our faith that the Lord's Supper is a means of grace to us.

II

Confirmation

Most of our attention in this lecture has already been given to the church's confession of the Lord's Supper as a means of grace, with a description of what that entails. Now we turn, briefly, to the confirmation of this doctrine by the authority of Holy Scripture. *The Lord's Supper as a Means of Grace: More than a Memory*, by Dr. Richard Barcellos,⁹ is a good book by a Reformed Baptist which is recommended for an exegetical demonstration.

Here I must limit myself to four concise arguments. First, even Memorialism recognizes the potential harm in the Lord's Supper for those who abuse it. That sober warning in 1 Corinthians 11 no doubt impresses us all. “For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation [or, judgment] to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep,” that is, many of the Corinthians had become ill, and some even died, as a divine judgment for partaking in an unworthy manner (1 Cor 11.29, 30). The ordinance abused became to them, not a means of grace, but of weakness, sickness, and death. It certainly was more than a memorial for them! If we can “eat and drink judgment” to ourselves, then it follows that we can also “eat and drink” blessing by His grace.

⁸ *The Baptist Confession of Faith & The Baptist Catechism*, SGCB and RBP, 2010, pp. 118–19.

⁹ *The Lord's Supper as a Means of Grace: More than a Memory*, Richard C. Barcellos, 2013, Mentor.

Can we imagine for a moment that our gracious Lord would not make His Supper a means of grace to those who “discern His body” in it and participate by faith with reverence and hope?

Second, consider the testimony of 1 Corinthians 10.16. Barcellos says this “may be the most important text on the nature of the Lord’s Supper as a means of grace in the New Testament (certainly in Paul’s letters).”¹⁰ This verse insists that the bread and cup of the Lord’s Supper is more than a memorial observance. Specifically, Paul wrote that it is “the communion [sharing] of the blood of Christ.” The same spiritual reality pertains to the bread as “the communion of the body of Christ.” The Greek term for “communion” is *koinonia* which means “participation, fellowship, the act of sharing in the activities or privileges of an intimate association” (LBSL). One lexicon even renders the phrase in this verse, “a means for attaining a close relationship with the blood (body) of Christ” (BDAG). Further, Paul is describing a present experience of the gathered church, not just the remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice that happened in the past. Who can fathom the spiritual good that comes of sharing in Christ?

Third, while there may not be a corresponding and explicit proof text in Scripture for every particular phrase used in the consensus documents we have cited, the substance of their teaching is completely warranted as reasonable inferences from various biblical statements. It is an extreme and unhealthy biblicism which refuses to infer theological truth from Holy Scripture that really is implicit in it. The Confession says that what we need for “faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in Holy Scripture” (2LCF 1.6). The “or” implies that not all that is truly “contained in Holy Scripture” is “expressly set down” in it. Much of its truth is only discerned by the hard work of Christ’s Church “reasoning” as a body “out of the Scriptures” over many centuries toward a consensus of sound doctrinal conclusions (cf. Acts 17.2). Since it is evident from Scripture that the Lord’s Supper is a means of God’s gracious blessing, it follows that the blessing is manifested in various ways not explicitly declared by Scripture. Therefore, the particular aspects listed in 2LCF are plausible on the face of it. There are arguments to be made for each one, but the burden of proof properly lies upon those who deny these specifics.

Fourth, Christ’s presentation of the elements as His body and blood imply a real impartation of some spiritual benefit, not bare physical symbols. The Puritan Walter Marshall wrote winsomely,

When Christ saith, “Eat, drink; this is my body, this is my blood,” no less can be meant, [than] that Christ doth as truly give his body and blood to true believers in that ordinance, as the bread and cup; and they do as truly receive it by faith. As, if a prince invest a subject in some honourable office, by delivering to him a staff, a sword, or a signet; and say to him, “take this staff, sword, or signet; this is such an office or preferment;” or if a father should deliver a deed for conveyance of land to his son, and say, “take it as thy own; this, is such a farm or manor;” how can such expressions import any thing less, in common sense and reason, than a present, gift, and conveyance of the offices, preferments, and lands, by and with those outward signs? Therefore the apostle, Paul asserteth, that the bread in the Lord’s

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

supper, “is the communion of the body of Christ, and the cup is the communion of his blood,” 1 Cor. 10:16; which, sheweth, that Christ’s body, and blood are really communicated to us, and we do really partake of them, as well as of the bread, and cup.

The chief excellency and advantage of this ordinance is, that it is not only a figure and resemblance of, our living upon a crucified Saviour, but also, a precious, instrument, whereby Christ, the bread and drink of life, is really conveyed to us and received by us through faith. This makes it to be a love-token, worthy of that ardent affection towards us, which filled Christ’s heart at the time when he instituted it, when he was on the point of finishing his greatest work of love, by “laying down his life for us,” 1 Cor. 11:23. And this is diligently to be observed, that we may make a right improvement of this ordinance, and receive the saving benefits of it.¹¹

Now we must hasten from the doctrine’s confession and the Scripture’s confirmation to the Church’s custom.

III

Custom

The obvious alliteration of confession, confirmation, and custom works because the third word is also a very good one to identify this last subtopic. I am using it the technical sense of sociology, where a “custom” is defined as “a group pattern of habitual activity transmitted from one generation to another.”¹² Custom is the behavior of a community, and our community is the Church of Jesus Christ. Custom is something done repeatedly, as the Lord’s Supper is to be observed by each particular church. Custom involves the inheritance of a tradition, which also applies to the Lord’s Supper received from Christ, through His apostles, and passed down from one generation to another through twenty centuries.

So how does the truth that the Lord’s Supper is a means of grace affect the Church’s custom of observance? How would particular Christians and churches need to change when repenting of Memorialism to embrace this sounder and richer view? I would offer just a few representative suggestions.

First, we should consciously anticipate great blessings by God’s grace in the right use of the ordinance. While God mercifully blesses even Memorialists more than they realize or admit through the Supper, our biblically-founded hope of greater things as Reformed believers pleases God and by faith lays hold of the blessings on purpose. In each observance, we should look forward to the confirmation of our faith, the nourishment of our souls, our growth as Christians and as churches, our deepened consecration for service, and the enjoyment of Christ’s bond or pledge with us and of us with one another. The Lord Jesus Christ who arouses

¹¹ Walter Marshall, *The Gospel-Mystery of Sanctification* (New York: Southwick and Peluse, 1811), pp. 254–55.

¹² <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/custom?s=t> accessed 1 Sep 2018.

our hopes for such things will not dash them. Discerning Christians can testify endlessly to receiving them.

Second, we should desire a frequent observance of the Lord's Supper and eagerly partake whenever we have the opportunity. Walter Marshall wrote,

one reason why many do little esteem, and seldom, or never partake of this ordinance, and do find little benefit of it, is, because they falsely imagine, that God in it only holds forth naked signs and resemblances of Christ and his salvation, which they account to be held forth so plainly in Scripture, that they need not the help of such a sign; whereas, if they understood, that God doth really give Christ himself to their faith, by and with those signs and resemblances, they would prize it as the most delicious feast, and be desirous to, partake of it on all opportunities.¹³

The church where I serve as a pastor has gone through this very reformation years ago. We had always practiced monthly communion like many of our sister churches. Then as God increased our appreciation for the Lord's Supper, we began weekly observance to be evaluated by the congregation after a trial of a couple months as I recall. The proposal met with some reservations in a few, but after the trial, not one single member wanted to revert to the monthly schedule. I have also noticed that some members who used to abstain, at least occasionally, from eating and drinking with the rest of us, have repented. They understand better now that we do this for Christ's honor and because we always need more of the grace He actually confers to us through our participation. While weekly communion on the Lord's Day is not explicitly prescribed in Scripture, this frequency as our normal custom has more scriptural warrant than any other. A survey of church history illustrates that more frequent communion seems to correlate with times of reformation and greater spiritual vitality.

Third and finally, understanding that the Lord's Supper is a means of grace fosters greater reverence, joy, and gratitude in the church. If the Lord's Supper were only a memorial ceremony, it would still be special because of the One we remember, but it is so much more than that! Christ is truly and spiritually present with us in and through the Supper. Let us be in awe of Him! Christ is present to convey saving and sanctifying grace to us. Let us rejoice! Christ is giving Himself to us for our progress toward full salvation. Let us gratefully praise Him!

Brethren, I urge you all to embrace the truth I have presented and to expect great things from Christ upon each occasion of His gracious presence in your communion services. Amen.

¹³ Walter Marshall, *ibid.*, p. 255.