

The Forgotten Art of Anamnesis

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Anamnesis (an/am nē/sis) n., 1. the act of reminiscence

Long before the age of smart phones and tablets, I could recall addresses and phone numbers of all my friends. That time has passed and now I do not even know the phone numbers of my own children. Like many, I tap their name on my smart phone and it dials their number. I e-mail or text them, and thus, do not have a clue of their mailing address. During the era of Bible drills, I knew exactly how deep to turn in my Bible to the book of Second Peter. Today, my Bible is an app on my smart phone; tap a book and chapter and within a second, it appears on the screen. Am I more dependent on technology and less dependent on my memory?

A popular praise chorus contains the words, “We will remember, we will remember, we will remember the works of your hands. We will stop and give you praise, for great is thy faithfulness.”² However, do we really pause in the midst of worship to remember? The fast-paced, technological society we live in has a dramatic effect on not only our daily lives, but also our worship. Has technology caused us to forget that which we are supposed to remember? I fear that for many worshipers, remembering our actions and elements of worship is a forgotten, if not lost, art.

Anamnesis and the Lord’s Supper

One of the most apparent areas in which remembrance is lacking is the observance of the Lord’s Supper. Many church congregants say they believe the Bible and everything found therein. They confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that Christians should follow the commands and examples set forth by Christ. They acknowledge that Christ instituted the Lord’s Supper and gave forth the command to go into the entire world preaching the gospel. One might even find a table with the inscription “Do This in Remembrance of Me” in front of the pulpit. Baptist congregants might also tell you that a proper Lord’s Supper includes bottled grape juice and a morsel of stale, unleavened bread. However, the Lord’s Supper is often an afterthought; something added to the worship service only once a quarter and even then rushed to fit within a ten-minute period at the end of the service.

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² Tommy Walker, “We Will Remember,” *Break Through: Live at Saddleback*, WeMobile Music. 2005. Used with permission.

The depth of the Lord's Supper has been lost—the meaning obscured, the comfort buried, and the teaching element forgotten. There is no longer anticipation of a Heavenly Feast because the observance has become a fast food meal. One source of this problem is that our seminaries and institutions of higher education fail to educate pastors and worship leaders on the importance of the Lord's Supper, thus leading the local church to the observance of it as an appendage to the service, conducted without much thought and meaning.

The Appendage of the Lord's Supper

Today, in most churches, individual glasses or cups containing a small amount of grape juice or wine distribute the elements of the Lord's Supper. Some churches even use a special pull-tab package that contains both bread and juice, thus creating a vending machine supper ready in an instant. Even worse is the diminishing of the supper far beyond anything Ulrich Zwingli would have ever imagined. In this service, ministers seek to assure the congregation that the Lord's Supper is merely a symbol with no sacramental or grace-communicating aspects. It is simply a command that the church must fulfill until Jesus comes again. This radical devaluation often leads churches to tack on the supper to the worship service, streamlined for the sake of convenience and stripped in terms of theological and spiritual significance.³

In fact, some modern-day churches have lost the entire meaning of the Lord's Supper. For many churches, technology and visual imagery has become the primary way to deliver the message of the gospel. Communion should be the central act of worship when we meet, not a curiosity or one more "worship element" squeezed onto the PowerPoint program.⁴ Franklin Segler's complaint of fifty years ago is no less accurate today:

The Lord's Supper, like baptism, should always be observed as a central part of the worship service and not made merely an addendum. In too many instances, it has been customary to have a full-length service then add the Lord's Supper at the end as a sort of afterthought. Such a careless observance is not worthy of this act of worship."⁵

Anamnesis of the New Covenant

The theme of covenant plays a pivotal role in the observance of the Lord's Supper. Covenants form relationships. Covenants between people create a relationship between

³ Bill Leonard, *Baptist in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 151.

⁴ Dan Schmidt, *Taken by Communion* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 17.

⁵ Franklin M. Segler, *Christian Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1967), 148.

people. A covenant between God and people establishes a relationship between God and the people. The Sinai Covenant formed a relationship between God and the Hebrews. At the Lord's Supper, Christ instituted a new covenant. Second Corinthians 3:6–18 and Hebrews 9:18–28, 10:16–17 show the correlation between the Mosaic and Christian covenants. The blood of animals sealed the old covenant and Christ's blood sealed a new covenant as stated in Luke 22:19–21. Luke makes a strong eschatological argument for the future coming of God's kingdom and the supper to come. As Robert Stein commented, "even as among their Jewish contemporaries the Passover awakened hopes and longings for the coming of the messianic banquet, so even more should the Lord's Supper cause Luke's readers to look not only backward to their Lord's death, but forward to his return."⁶ Jesus established a new covenant to fulfill the prophecy from Jeremiah 31:31–33. The observing of the Lord's Supper reenacts the new covenant between participants and God.⁷

Historical Foundations

Christian and Jewish worship find commonality in worship within the early church. Jewish converts to Christianity continued to worship in the Temple and to keep Torah as well as attend worship within the Christian church. The Lord's Supper was the single most important occasion in the early church. What began as a simple act of eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of Jesus Christ will later evolve into elaborate liturgical practices.

The problem in grasping the concepts of the early church arise due to the lack of complete written records, divergent translations of extant sources, and the use of expressions that may mean something totally different to the modern reader. The letters of Paul and the writings of the early church fathers offer a variety of names for the Lord's Supper. Understandably, the early church fathers use language that reflects Jewish ideas of worship. At the same time, according to C. W. Dugmore, "the early Christians added another element to their life and worship, derived directly from Jesus. This was the perpetuation, in prayer and the breaking of bread, of the experience of the Upper Room."⁸

An important concept in the ancient period was that world and worship were one. The Eucharistic focus was not on bread and wine but on the communal breaking and sharing of bread as a symbolic action of God nurturing the people.⁹ Wolfgang Vondey reflects the same theology when he observes that Paul employs bread as an illustration of his the-

⁶ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary, vol. 24, ed. David Dockery (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 544.

⁷ Eduard Schweizer, "Body," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 769.

⁸ C. W. Dugmore, *The Influence of the Synagogue upon the Divine Office* (London: Faith Press Ltd., 1964), 6.

⁹ Ingrid Shafer, *The Eucharist: Only a Symbol?*, [online] <http://astro.temple.edu/~arcc/euch.htm>, February 3, 2010.

ology, and that in Luke's Book of Acts, bread was at the very core of life and worship in the community of the first Christians.¹⁰

Early Christians experienced persecution for their beliefs and great secrecy influenced worship practices. G. D. Yarnold suggests "that such secrecy may account for a certain reticence, or reluctance, to commit to writing too much detail when the narrative of the Supper came to be recorded in the Gospels or elsewhere, lest the written work should fall into the hands of unbelievers."¹¹ The *Didache* reminded believers to be faithful to the Eucharist. First-century Christians took this admonition seriously, even to the point of death.¹² Early Christians understood that Jesus, by way of the Eucharist, was within their midst. As Richard Spielmann explains it, "they believed their Lord was present, but they did not go into detailed descriptions of how he was present."¹³ Eric Rust sums up this idea by saying remembrance means calling the past back into present experience so that it becomes a present reality.¹⁴

Anamnesis in the 21st Century

Baptist theologian G. Thomas Holbrooks has attempted to recover the early Baptist understanding of the Lord's Supper, and states that "the English translation of *anamnesis* . . . means 'to recall or represent the past event in such a way as to make it currently operative, to make its power available in the here and now.'"¹⁵ He believes that it is much more than a commemorative meal:

Communion is more than a bare memorial that calls to remembrance something which happened long ago. It is a remembrance that draws the fullness of God's past action in Christ into the present moment with power, so that believers experience anew God's reconciling love.¹⁶

¹⁰ Wolfgang Vondey, *People of Bread: Rediscovering Ecclesiology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008), 105.

¹¹ G. D. Yarnold, *The Bread We Break* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 27.

¹² See transcripts of the court inquiry held at Carthage in North Africa, on February 12, 304, in Massey Shepherd, *The Worship of the Church* (Greenwich: The Seabury Press, 1960), 4–5, quoting Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, VIII, 688.

¹³ Richard Spielmann, *History of Christian Worship* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1966), 17–18.

¹⁴ Eric Rust, "Theology of the Lord's Supper," *Review & Expositor* 66 (1969): 38.

¹⁵ G. Thomas Holbrooks, *A Baptist's Theology*, ed. R. Wayne Stacy (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 187.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

In addition, Gerald Borchert encourages the modern church to recapture the significance of the Lord's Supper: "While we are not likely to return to the style of the early church, perhaps a concerted reflection on what the Supper was in Paul's time might engender some creativity into our later formalities and encourage us to recover some of the lost meaning in our worship celebration of the Supper."¹⁷

Recovering the Element of Remembrance

So what are the steps in recovering the art of remembrance? Scripture contains several biblical truths concerning the Lord's Supper that provide a foundation for its centrality in worship.

First, there is spiritual nourishment found in the Lord's Supper. Of all the elements on the table before him, Christ chose bread. By doing so, Jesus became the shewbread in the Temple described in 1 Kings 7:48. He became the bread that Melchizedek offered to Abraham in Genesis 14:18 and the cake that the angel brought to Elijah in 1 Kings 19:6. Nourishment occurs because Christ, like bread, sustains life as he promised in John 6:57. Bread satisfies hunger as Christ fulfills the soul, and bread fortifies the physical heart (Psalm 104:15) as Christ bolsters the weary heart. W. Norman Pettenger, for instance, refers to "the strengthening holy food" of the Eucharist.¹⁸

The Lord's Supper reflects the presence of Christ. Christ called the bread "his body," indicating that he is present in the Lord's Supper. Daniel Jenkins states, "In themselves these elements have no power. They are signs, which have potency only as they point away from themselves to him whom they signify."¹⁹

Third, Christ tells us that the Lord's Supper is a time of remembrance and proclamation as explained in 1 Corinthians 11:23–26:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Fourth, Luke 24:29–32 indicates that revelation occurs at the table.

But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened

¹⁷ Gerald Borchert, *Worship in the New Testament* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 111.

¹⁸ W. Norman Pittenger, *The Christian Sacrifice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), 68.

¹⁹ Daniel Jenkins, "Christ Comes to Us," in *The Table of the Lord*, ed. Charles Wallis (New York: Harper Brothers Publishers, 1958), 65.

and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

Fifth, the Lord's Supper brings unity to the church as asserted in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17:

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

A prayer in the *Didache* reads, "As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains, but was brought together and became one, so let thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into thy Kingdom; for thine is the glory, and the power, through Jesus Christ, forever."²⁰

Sixth, anticipation is part of the Lord's Supper. Christ promised that he would not drink from the fruit of the vine "until that day when I drink it with you anew in the Kingdom of God" (Mark 14:25). Oscar Cullmann, in his study of worship in the early church, explained that the Eucharist looks back to the Messianic Meal promised by Jesus at the Last Supper, which was highly anticipated by the Christian community.²¹

Seventh, the Lord's Supper contains the theme of forgiveness and thanksgiving. Matthew 26:27-28 states that "they took the cup and gave thanks and that the wine now poured out was for the forgiveness of sins." Psalm 103:3-4 reflects this sentiment as it praises the Lord, "who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion." The theme of forgiveness extends to the "new covenant" as promised in Jeremiah 31:34: "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." I. Howard Marshall claims that "in due course the Lord's Supper became the sign not simply of the offer of salvation but also of the reception of salvation."²²

In addition to these biblical truths about the role of the Lord's Supper, the entire gospel story is on display during Communion. There is renewing of a covenant (Ps 2:5), remission of sin (Matt 26:28), a blotting out of a debt we cannot pay (Col 2:14), a sharing in the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13), strengthening of grace (Heb 13:9), a seal of faith (2 Cor 7:9), and promise of resurrection (John 6:34).

²⁰ Charles H. Hoole, trans., *Didache* (chap. 9, 4), [online] www.earlychristianwritings.com. accessed September 1, 2009.

²¹ Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953), 15.

²² I. Howard Marshall, *Last Supper, Lord's Supper* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1980), 85.

Practical Suggestions

Robert Webber provides several practical suggestions that will help Communion become a more powerful medium for communicating God's saving work and our appropriation of it.

Put more stress on what God is doing through Communion and less emphasis on the unworthy state of the worshiper. . . . By overindulging ourselves in a remembrance of our sin, we sometimes get stuck at that point. Then the real message of bread and wine, which is a proclamation of forgiveness and healing, is overshadowed by a preoccupation with sin.

Increase the frequency of celebrating Christ's death and resurrection at the Communion Table. It was the norm of the early church to proclaim Christ's death and resurrection at the Table every Sunday. . . . The testimony of those who have turned to more frequent Communion affirms that it develops, enhances, and encourages a growing relationship with the Lord.

Ask the people to come forward to receive the bread and wine. Since response to Christ is an important element of Communion, why not find a symbolic way to express it? . . . One can receive Christ without the external actions, but don't the external actions enhance, encourage, and even help to solidify that which we do internally?

Sing songs during Communion, which reflect both God's work and our response. Music itself is both a verbal and symbolic form of communication. When music is played and sung during Communion, it embodies and communicates the message.²³

Renewal Inspired by Anamnesis

The above-mentioned steps will encourage the congregation to develop a desire for more meaningful observances of the Lord's Supper and allow them to realize that it is more than an ordinance done solely because Christ issued a command. Growth as a Christian and as a church body is dependent upon our fellowship with Christ through this meal. "Renewal" summarizes its effect in one word. John Hammett explains the relationship between the Lord's Supper and renewal: "First, the remembrance of our Lord's death should lead to a renewal of our repentance. Second, the Supper should be an occasion to renew our faith. Finally, the Lord's Supper is also an occasion for renewing our commitment to the church."²⁴

²³ Robert Webber, *Worship Is a Verb: Eight Principles for Transforming Worship* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 1992), 97.

²⁴ John S. Hammett, "Article VII: Baptism and the Lord's Supper," in *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, ed. Douglas Blount & Joseph Wooddell (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 77.

Renewal helps to produce sound doctrine. Paul tells us to remember the Lord's death through the supper and the symbols therein "until Jesus comes again." Our theology and doctrine cannot change for the sake of society. As in the early church, the Lord's Supper should be the central act of our worship as we remember his sacrifice. "And he broke it and said, 'This is my body broken for you, do this in remembrance of me.'" Remembering helps us to build relationships with the Christian community and in remembering the Lord we "recognize the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:29). The body of Christ is our very congregation and we identify Christ in the elements of Communion. As we touch the bread and cup, feel the elements and taste the flavors, we remember and recognize Christ. Each time we eat this meal, we remember. But it is more than just remembering, it is *anamnesis*, bringing the past into the present, in such a way that that we do not just recall, but we relive the event, so that our faith becomes anchored in the past.

Renewal inspires our desire for joyful thanksgiving. In the early church, thanksgiving was the dominant theme, so too should our modern worship be an occasion for gladness. "And while they were eating Jesus took bread and gave thanks" (Mark 14:22). "Eating and drinking in remembrance of Jesus will be a genuine Eucharist only when accompanied by supplication, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings."²⁵ Despite knowing that the bread he broke represented himself, Christ offered thanks. As Christians, we should gather at the table and offer our thanks for all our blessings.

Renewal leads to unity and comfort. Christ confided that "he longed to eat this Passover meal" with the disciples, who were in effect his family. We must come to the Lord's Table with a sense of kinship, as members of the family of God. At this table, we find comfort with our fellow family members, as did the early church, communing with our Lord Jesus.

Renewal spurs righteousness and holiness. We find righteousness when we gather at the table. Christ shed his blood for the remission of our sin. Hebrews 10:16-17 reminds us of a covenant that brings forgiveness and righteousness: "In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.'" Covenants date back to Adam, Abraham, Noah, and Moses, and all contain a promise of blessing. Covenants required the shedding of blood, but this time it is the blood of the Lamb of God. In taking the cup, Jesus proclaimed that his blood sealed this new covenant. When we drink from the cup, we "proclaim the Lord's death." Christ instructed his disciples to go and proclaim the gospel. I. Howard Marshall declares that "to eat and drink at the Supper is to proclaim the death of the Lord. The Supper is a memorial of Jesus in that each time it takes place it transforms the participants into preachers."²⁶ Our time at the table is also a time of renewing our commitment, confessing our sins, and examining our personal holiness.

Renewal aids in our time of reflection as we contemplate Calvary and the price paid upon that altar. We should ponder the present and the blessings God has given to us. We

²⁵ Arthur Cochrane, *Eating and Drinking with Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 75.

²⁶ Marshall, *Last Supper, Lord's Supper*, 113.

should anticipate the future and the promises that lay before us at a heavenly banquet table. Since the day of Pentecost, the church has placed its hope in the anticipation of the great meal to come – the marriage supper of the Lamb, a heavenly imperial banquet (Luke 22:30; Revelation 19:7, 21:2, and 22:17). Gordon Smith expounds on Communion’s eschatological significance: “Just as the Lord’s Supper anticipates the other meal, it is also the case that the heavenly banquet, the marriage supper of the Lamb, permeates this meal. The Lord’s Supper is infused with hope; our present is shaped, informed, and ultimately transformed by the reality of a meal that is yet to come.”²⁷

Conclusion

Previously, I attempted to approach this meal with a clean heart and conscience, understanding that it was simply a memorial, a symbolic observance. Now, I draw near the table and see so much more: an altar, a cross, a place sacred, where my mortal world intersects with the spiritual realm, and where past, present, and future merge. It is a table set before me in the presence of my enemies, a feast in which my cup overflows. It is no longer a wafer I hold in my hand; it is manna from the desert, bread from the basket of a little boy, a Passover observance with Jesus, a taste of the future. Bread, that which was once whole, now broken for me; His body, the bread of life. It is no longer juice, but His blood; it is the blood that appeared on the doorpost in Egypt during the Passover, the blood that flowed down Calvary’s cross. It is a meal, taken not in solitude, but in the presence of the saints of the past, a rehearsal for a banquet that is to come. It is a meal that spans time and space,²⁸ unchanged for two millennia. Real presence, spiritual presence, or memorial presence? That question has been debated for centuries with subtle nuances almost too close to distinguish. Yet, the spiritual effects of the Lord’s Supper transcend human disputes and understanding. Indeed, there is more to the Lord’s Supper than what I once thought. I invite you to join me on this journey and together let us renew the art of anamnesis.

²⁷ Gordon Smith, *A Holy Meal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 94.

²⁸ On the morning of July 20, 1969, Buzz Aldrin, the second man to walk on the moon, radioed Houston to give him a few minutes of quiet. He removed a tiny communion kit, began to read John 15:5, and then observed communion while sitting on the surface of the moon.