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*The Lord's Supper:
Reclaiming the Symbolic Meal
from a Symbol of a Meal*

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Introduction

It is animal nature to eat, but it is human nature to fellowship over food. The table is the place where people show to whom they belong and who belongs to them. People invite their closest friends to eat; those times of the year when they gather for special meals, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, are deeply anticipated, more so for the company than the cuisine. Of course, when relationships are strained, meals become an ordeal and one wishes nothing more than to get it over and get away. What is desired is not just fast food, but fast fellowship. It is a hope that western Christianity in the 21st century, in its disconnected and socially isolated existence (even though it has Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook), will come together around the Lord's Table to break bread and proclaim His death until He comes, and in doing this will find the community of the church as described in the New Testament.

This article's thesis is that the standard practice of reducing the symbolic Supper (regarding the bodily presence of Christ in the elements) to a symbol of the Supper (a wafer and small cup) has failed to enact the proper dramatic practice of the Lord's Supper.¹ While the Supper is meant to be a time of community remembrance and anticipation the current practice in many evangelical churches of passing individualized cups and tiny precut wafers creates a time of isolation between members as focus is given almost exclusively to one's own spiritual condition and relationship with God. The symbols used for the meal contribute to the individualization of the Supper. Each person takes his own cup and wafer that is sized for his individual

¹Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005). Vanhoozer's book is a sustained argument for the importance of doctrine in the Christian life. Additionally, he advocates that doctrines are not dead things to be left on a page, but are meant to be performed. The doctrines of the Christian faith are the stage directions for how the church can faithfully perform its actions. Doctrines are not complete until they are lived out in the life of the church, and how they are lived out in the church often teaches more than the words on the page.

meal. These symbols of a supper make it more difficult for the person to see the unified body of Christ in the bread and the cup because each of those elements has already been prearranged for the individual to acquire easily without considering someone else's portion.

The article will consist of four parts. The first, entitled "The Biblical Stage Decoration," will outline the evidence from the Bible that supports the Supper being a full meal. The second part will offer a historical investigation into how this stage decoration was reset from a full meal into a symbol of a meal in regard to portion size. The third part offers a theological argument of the meal that is truly Zwinglian—a symbol of the meal (i.e. cup and wafer) may not be the most dramatically fitting performance available. In opposition to a Real Presence understanding of the meal as a means of regenerative grace, in which only a symbol of the meal is needed to obtain the meal's grace, the section will attempt to show that the meal is about building community between members as they remember Christ's death and look forward to his return. The nature of the one loaf as attested by Paul will be the basis for arguing that the symbol (cup and wafer) of a symbolic meal (a rejection of Real Presence) needs to be replaced with an actual meal containing the bread and wine that symbolizes Christ's body and blood. A full meal better conveys the meaning of the Supper than a mere symbol of a meal has been able to do. The paper will end with practical suggestions for how a full meal could be accomplished in the local church and some benefits that could be derived from the move.

Setting the Biblical Stage Decoration

In the Gospels, we find Jesus regularly engaged in meals, the most famous and important one being the final meal of his life: The Last Supper.² It was from this event that Jesus's followers were given the practice of breaking bread in connection with the Lord's Supper. In the context of the Passover, the phrase "breaking bread" was given a deeper meaning than merely eating, being additionally associated with the body of Christ given for the sins of the world.

In the Last Supper, Jesus gathered with his closest disciples to celebrate and remember the Exodus from Egypt, and in the midst of the meal, He explained that a greater exodus was soon to take place through His coming crucifixion.³ It was this meal that formed the basis for what is termed the Lord's Supper, a meal in which the New Covenant is symbolized in bread

²Jesus is often found dining with others in the Gospels. In the Gospel of Luke Jesus eats with Levi the tax collector (5:27–32), Simon the Pharisee (7:36–50), the 5000 (9:10–17), Mary and Martha (10:38–42), an unnamed Pharisee (11:37–52), a ruler of the Pharisees (14:1–24), Zacchaeus (19:1–10), the Last Supper (22: 14–38), the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (24:28–32), and the disciples (24:36–43). In addition to the Synoptic accounts, Jesus performs his first sign in John's Gospel in the context of a meal at Cana (John 2:1–12). Robert J. Karris, *Eating Your Way Through Luke's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2006).

³N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 554–63.

and wine.⁴ The question to ask in the aftermath of the crucifixion and resurrection is, Did the apostles continue to celebrate this meal in its Passover form or did they translate it into a new meal? A further question to ask relates to whether this new meal is a full meal, as was the Passover, or was it a symbol of a meal, as practiced today in most churches?

The first passage to investigate is Acts 2:42–47, which describes the activities of Jesus’s first followers after Pentecost. They gathered for teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers. The phrase “breaking of bread” is the one that requires further attention. Is this a term that has taken on a deeper meaning, that it is in fact a reference to the Lord’s Supper, or does it only mean that they were eating together? While numerous commentators argue that this is indeed a reference to the Lord’s Supper, in order to ascertain how Luke is employing the idea of breaking bread, one must examine its use in the rest of his writings.⁵

The first time Luke employs the language of breaking bread is in Luke 9:16. In this verse, Jesus is said to have taken five loaves (bread) and two fish to feed five thousand men. Luke recounts that Jesus took the bread and fish, blessed it, broke it and then continued to pass out what seemed to be an unending supply of both to the crowd. While this event does not immediately lead someone to see a relationship to the Lord’s Supper, when taken in conjunction with John 6 the connection may become apparent. In John 6, Jesus says He is the Bread of Life and that one must eat His flesh and drink His blood to find that life. The disciples would have seen a connection between the feeding of the crowd and Jesus’s further explanation at the Last Supper regarding what it means to eat His flesh and drink His blood. Joel Green recognizes the similarity in wording between this passage and the Last Supper wording in Luke 22:19. He further notes that the feeding of the five thousand is set in a context in which “kingdom proclamation and messianic suffering figure prominently.”⁶ This connection with kingdom and suffering lends a further connection to the Last Supper in which both of those themes are prominent.

The next use of the term “breaking bread” occurs on the day of the resurrection while Jesus is eating with the two disciples who were travelling to Emmaus. As they were sitting down to eat, Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it to them, reminiscent of the scene a few nights earlier in the Last

⁴For an overview of the supper see Ben Witherington III, *Making a Meal of It: Rethinking the Theology of the Lord’s Supper*. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007); I. Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord’s Supper*. (Vancouver, Regent College Publishing, 2006); Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*. (London, SCM, 2011).

⁵F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 73; Bradley J. Chance, *Acts*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), 59; I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 88–89; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 160–01.

⁶Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 762.

Supper. They then realized their guest was Jesus and He disappeared. The two immediately returned to Jerusalem to report what had happened, and in Luke 24:35 it was revealed that Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread. The close connection in the Emmaus account with the breaking of bread in the Last Supper lends strong evidence to the idea that the phrase “breaking bread” is a term Luke is employing in reference to the Last Supper, and potentially the Lord’s Supper that flows from it.⁷

Acts 20 recounts the story of Paul and word weary Eutychus. In 20:7 we are told that the church had gathered on the first day of the week to break bread. F.F. Bruce argues that this is the earliest passage from which we can ascertain that Christians came together on the first day of the week for worship. Further he writes “the breaking of the bread was probably a fellowship meal in the course of which the Eucharist was celebrated.”⁸ Paul talked until midnight, at which point Eutychus plunged to his death. Paul rushed down and revived the young man, went back upstairs, broke bread and ate, and then continued to talk until daybreak. The express intention of gathering on the first day of the week was to break bread, and it was sometime after midnight that this occurred. While it seems clear from 20:11 that breaking bread refers to a meal, does it connect with the Lord’s Supper as part of that meal? Acts 20:7 indicates that it would, given that it was the purpose of the gathering, and as we will be shown in 1 Corinthians 11, having the Supper when the church gathered was a regular occurrence.

Acts 27:35 is one of two instances in Luke’s writing where the idea of breaking bread is not directly related to a gathering of believers, the other being the feeding of the five thousand. In Acts 27 Paul is a prisoner on a boat bound for Rome. During the voyage, the boat encounters a storm so terrible that the crew fears it will capsize. Paul encourages the soldiers and prisoners to take nourishment since they had not eaten in fourteen days. Paul then takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and eats. The context of the mixed crowd on the ship mitigates against seeing this breaking of bread as the Lord’s Supper, but it does reinforce the idea that breaking bread involves more food than a mere token of bread and wine.⁹ This passage, unlike the feeding of the five thousand, is the one exception that casts doubt upon Luke’s use of breaking bread as shorthand for the Lord’s Supper. While this does not eclipse the evidence already offered, it does give a reason to show caution in understanding the phrase as a technical term to describe the Lord’s Supper.

⁷Joel Green states, “Given the background in Jesus’ own table practice for occasions of ‘breaking bread’ in Acts, we might anticipate that these meals would signify the coming near of salvation, and this is certainly the case.” Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 851.

⁸Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 384.

⁹Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 773; Marshall, *Acts*, 434. F.F. Bruce, however, argues it was a Eucharist for the believers, but not the non-believers on the ship. He offers no compelling evidence for his conclusion and therefore it is hard to follow him in his claim. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 492–93.

Having examined the issue of the Lord's Supper in relation to breaking bread in Luke's writing, we will now consider Paul's contribution to the Supper in 1 Corinthians 10–11. In these chapters Paul is clearly referring to a meal that had significance beyond just filling one's belly. In 10:18 he asks if the cup the Corinthians bless and the bread they break is not a participation in Christ. Paul compares the Lord's Supper to pagan meals in which the worshipper communed with and in some sense dined with the deity.¹⁰ Paul argues that the Lord's Supper is a participation in Christ, a statement of fidelity to Him. When Paul turns to the abuses of the members during the Supper, it is obvious that they were participating in a full meal. In Corinth, there was the possibility of overindulgence in food and wine. One could go home drunk, while another went home hungry. In most churches, everyone goes home hungry and there is no possibility of getting drunk, unless someone were to requisition an entire communion tray for himself—a highly unlikely act!

It was in the context of a meal that the Corinthian church displayed such horrible "table manners." As they gathered together to break bread, they were not exhibiting the unity that Christ gives, but were instead living under the old social divisions of Corinthian culture.¹¹ The division was so great that Paul told them they were not eating the Lord's Supper, though in fact some of them were eating a full meal, while others were left out. The Lord's Supper was meant to bring and to display the unity of the body according 1 Corinthians 10:17, but the Corinthian meal was bringing and revealing division. Paul calls them to correct this problem and thus avoid the indigestion (1 Cor 11:30) that a bad meal can cause.¹²

The last verses to consider are 2 Peter 2:13 and Jude 12, in which believers are warned about false teachers at their feasts. The evidence is too scant to determine conclusively if the love feast was the same as the Lord's Supper, but it is known that subsequently the love feast was distinct from the Supper. That was a development that was attested around the 2nd century.¹³ Given the references to the church sharing the Lord's Supper as a meal, it appears most likely that Peter and Jude are referring to that same Supper. This is further supported by his statement that they feast without fear when juxtaposed with Paul's warning of the results of partaking of the Supper in

¹⁰Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 465–73.

¹¹Witherington III, *Making a Meal of It*, 33–62; Fee, *Corinthians*, 540–45.

¹²In 1 Corinthians 11:30 Paul connects sickness and death that existed among the Corinthians congregation as related to how they were treating each other at the supper. It is not clear from Paul how this sickness and death had come about, whether by a direct judgment from God or because of the tension of the strained relationships among the body. Either way, Paul is clear that the behavior of the Corinthians at the meal was having a direct effect upon the health of the members of the congregation.

¹³Witherington III, *Making a Meal of It*, 97–109. It will be shown in the next section how the Lord's Supper subsequently became a separate event from the love feast, with the latter becoming a meal for the less fortunate in the church.

an unworthy manner, that is, when one fails to rightly recognize the body of Christ, a reference both to Christ's physical body and Christ's people.¹⁴ In both passages it is during the meal that the false teachers are able to spread their pernicious ideas. This would not be possible if the feast were not a full meal in which people could interact with each other.

It can be stated with a high degree of certainty from the verses presented that the church in the New Testament was eating a full meal in the context of the Lord's Supper. How the bread and wine were incorporated into that meal is not explained, though, and this leaves it up to each church to determine how to serve the Supper to enact the meal with dramatic fittingness.

The Biblical Stage Decoration Reset

In moving into the post-apostolic era many things began to change, for our purposes the Lord's Supper changed from a full meal into a symbol of a meal. We will demonstrate this change by examining samplings from select writings during the first several centuries of church history.

The *Didache* is a first century manual of church order that addresses the issue of the Lord's Supper.¹⁵ In *Didache* 9 and 10 one sees a reference to the Supper in which instructions about communion are given, with emphasis upon the prayers offered. In chapter 9 it states that only those who have been baptized may partake of the meal and in chapter 10 it reads, "After you are filled, give thanks this way."¹⁶ While it is not conclusive, the idea of giving thanks after you are filled points to the position that it was a full meal that was taking place.¹⁷ Furthermore, in chapter 14 on assembling on the Lord's Day, it reads, "But every Lord's day gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure." Here the Lucan phrase "break bread" is used as a reference to the Lord's Supper. This lends support to the phrase in Luke being understood as a reference to the Lord's Supper, but it does not give enough information to determine the amount of food that was consumed at the meal. Henk Jan de Jonge believes that the meal in *Didache* 14 is "the weekly community supper on Sunday evening."¹⁸ This supper would have consisted of more than a tiny portion of bread and a sip of wine.

¹⁴*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1988), s.v. "agape." *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (1990), s.v. "agape."

¹⁵Allen, George Cantrell. *The Didache: Or, The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. London: Astolat Press, 1903.

¹⁶*Didache*, 6–7.

¹⁷Witherington III, *Making a Meal of It*, 90–95.

¹⁸Henk Jan de Jonge, "The Early History of the Lord's Supper." in *Religious Identity and the Invention of Identity: Papers read at a NOSTER Conference in Soesterberg, January 4–6 1999*, edited by Jan Willem van Henten and Anton Houtepen (Assen, The Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2001), 222.

Ben Witherington argues that the Lord's Supper meal began to change in the 2nd century through the combined effects of four forces. First, as ecclesial power was consolidated in the hands of monarchical bishops, the Supper was increasingly seen as only valid when performed under the auspices of a bishop. This is evidenced by Ignatius around AD 110 when he wrote to Smyrna, "It is not permissible either to baptize or to hold a love feast without the bishop."¹⁹ As the meal became more consolidated under the control of the bishop, its character as a full meal was more easily changed over time to deal with other concerns.

The second force that brought change was the rising battle against Gnosticism. As one reads Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Cyril, he can see that they are beginning to speak of a change in the bread and wine. Over time this tendency would lead to the full-blown doctrine of transubstantiation. This in turn led to a position in which one only needs a small amount of the Supper to receive the entire body and blood of Christ. While the 2nd century writers were not advocating a symbolic meal in relation to portion size, the shift to seeing the elements transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ would lend itself to a reduction in the size of the meal.²⁰

Third, a rising asceticism gave impetus to the church to reduce the size of the meal. As critics of the Christian love feast compared it to pagan debauchery, those who defended the church sought to show that their meals were in fact moderate and restrained. Witherington writes, "The more ascetical the church became, the more concern there was about the potential bad witness of the agape, and this in fact led to the separation of the agape from the celebration of the Lord's Supper altogether as it became a "church ceremony" rather than a part of a Christian family meal."²¹ Eventually, at the Council of Trullo in AD 692 the love feast was banned from the Catholic Church.

The final change took place as the church became more Greek and the platonic distinction between form and matter took over. Under this pressure the meal turned into the Mass and the discussion shifted to whether the bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ. In effect, the church was not addressing whether a symbol of a meal can accomplish the same thing as a real meal; it was debating whether the elements were transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ.²²

So how did the Supper move from a meal to a symbol of a meal? Initially the church would meet on Sunday night. They would start with a meal, that included the Lord's Supper and then retire for worship in which there would be singing, preaching, and prophesying. This can be observed

¹⁹Ignatius, *Letter to Smyrna* 8. That the love feast is connected with both baptism and the need for a bishop's presence gives strong evidence that at this time the love feast and the Lord's Supper were the same event.

²⁰Witherington III, *Making a Meal of It*, 101–05.

²¹Witherington III, *Making a Meal of It*, 106.

²²Witherington III, *Making a Meal of It*, 113–25.

in 1 Corinthians 11–14. Since Sunday was a work day the meetings were in the evening. In the 2nd century the church started to gather for prayer early on Sunday morning before going to work and eventually the bread and wine were given at this gathering. Because it was early morning it was not necessary to have as much food, and this was the beginning of the separation between the Lord's Supper as a real meal and the Supper as a symbol of a meal. As the church continued to grow, the morning service became the primary service and the evening gathering was only attended by those who were in need of assistance from the church in the form of a meal.²³

Eventually, the debate over the Supper was not about portion size, but about the real presence of Christ in the elements. Recounting the debate over transubstantiation is beyond the scope of this article, but suffice it to say that in the Reformation the Zwinglian view of the Supper as a memorial gained traction among many people. While the debate over the transformation of the elements took place there was no subsequent debate of any intensity over whether the symbols themselves (wafer and cup) could convey the memorial intent of the original Supper. Does the way a memorial is performed impact the outcome that the memorial is intended to create? In other words, if the props for the play have been radically changed, can the play be faithfully performed? While this article does not argue that the traditional manner of celebrating the Supper with a small wafer and cup cannot accomplish the biblical goal, it does suggest that the reset staging makes it much harder to accomplish that goal and can tend to convey ideas that the original Supper never intended. It is for this reason that the modern stage decoration needs to be reset to the biblical stage decoration.

Resetting the Modern Stage Decoration

It is impressive how powerful eating together can be. During the Civil Rights Movement African Americans and whites would attend the same churches, albeit not in large numbers, and they undoubtedly partook of the Lord's Supper together. It was however, the Greensboro sit-ins at Woolworths that outraged the segregated nation. On 1 February 1960 four African American college students sat down to eat a meal at the Woolworths lunch counter, and were refused service at the "Whites Only" counter. The men did not leave, but instead stayed until the store closed. The protest grew and eventually on July 25, 1960 African Americans were served at the Woolworths store.

This story speaks to the power of sharing a meal. While in church it was acceptable to share the Lord's Supper together many of the same people would not eat a meal with someone of a different race. Could it be that the symbolic nature of the Supper (in terms of the meal itself and not the presence of Christ) effectively removed the need to find unity within the church

²³Jan de Jonge, "The Early History of the Lord's Supper." De Jonge's article gives a thorough treatment of the early church writings to establish the above brief overview.

at the meal? Perhaps the outrage from white people generated by eating with African Americans was not prevalent at the Lord's Supper, because the church was not having a real meal, and the racial division that cut across many churches could not be addressed from a 1 Corinthians 11 perspective because the white people in church did not feel the outrage at eating the Lord's Supper with African Americans in the same manner as they did as eating at the Woolworth's lunch counter. This speaks to the power of table fellowship with one another. By not having a full meal as the Lord's Supper the church in America found it difficult to see how it was re-enacting 1 Corinthians 11, but instead of upon socio-economic lines it was dividing on racial lines.

It was not long ago in the United States that congregations were segregated by race, with African-Americans forced to relinquish their seats to whites and retire to the balcony for worship service. There could not be a more graphic example of the very problem in Corinth as these segregated churches ate the Supper together. The white and black congregants would eat and drink their symbolic meal at the same time, but they were not eating the Supper as Paul said to the Corinthians. These same people would not sit down to a real meal together, but could carry on the façade of the Lord's Supper without feeling the disunity in the congregation, and without experiencing the unity that a shared meal can create between people. If the Lord's Supper had been a real meal in those churches it might have been easier to let Paul's admonition to the Corinthians pierce through the racial division with the light of the unity that is found in Christ by the Spirit.

The reset stage decoration of the individualized wafer and cup, exemplified in the Meals Ready to Eat (MRE) style combo wafer and cup wrapped neatly in cellophane, lends itself quite strongly to conveying through its symbolism a message of dining alone with God. Each person in church carefully selects the wafer and cup, cautious not to touch anyone else's, and then sits quietly alone in the midst of the congregation waiting to eat and drink the bite-sized portion of a meal. While the church strives to present the Supper as a time of unity, often by consuming the elements at the same time, its symbols bring about an interiority and individualism that would not have existed in the New Testament as they enjoyed a meal together. As the pre-cut wafers and individual communion cups are passed, the symbols emphasize that as one partakes of this meal, it is about the wafer and cup, not the oneness from which the bread and wine come.

Also in a misguided understanding of 1 Corinthians 11:27–29, people are asked to search within themselves to see if they have unconfessed sin, when in fact, Paul was admonishing the Corinthians to look around the table and be sure that they were treating each other well, waiting on each other, showing the proper hospitality to each other as is fitting for those who are in Christ.²⁴ Within the larger context of the passage Paul is concerned about

²⁴Many churches practice a time of private confession of sin before the serving of

the “table manners” of the Corinthians and how their divisions were making a mockery of the unity they had in Christ. In 11:29 Paul warns the Corinthians to discern the body correctly. When Paul talks about the body he is referring to the church as the body of Christ; a metaphor that he expands in 1 Corinthians 12. Of course, Paul also understands the tight connection between Christ and the church as His body from his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, in which Jesus told Paul that he was persecuting Him in his persecution of His followers.

In many places church members have been conditioned not to look at each other during the Lord’s Supper, not to make eye contact, out of fear that they will interrupt someone’s private communion/confession with Christ. This practice would appear odd if the people were eating an actual meal, as they stare deeply into their plate, unwilling to talk to the people across from them, unwilling to experience the fellowship and joy that breaking bread together can bring. The modern practice indeed strikes the minor key of the death of Jesus, the grief that a loss can bring, and the silence that may ensue, but it does not resolve that melody into the major key of the victory of His resurrection. Yet Paul tells the church that in the Supper it proclaims Jesus’ death (minor key) until He comes (major key)—pathos and joy rolled into one meal.

The Challenges and Benefits of a Reset Stage

How then can the symbolic meal be reclaimed from the symbol of a meal to experience the fullness of the New Testament practice? Also, what benefits might accrue from this change in practice? I have a few suggestions that I have worked out in my context both as a professor of theology at Midwestern Baptist Seminary and a pastor at Northland Baptist Church. First, the church should have a real meal. This is quite a simple suggestion, but it carries with it some strong challenges both practical and doctrinal. Practically speaking, how is a church to pull off this feat? At one time, Baptists were lampooned for always eating when they got together, but sadly, today they have lost this stereotype and many churches would struggle logistically to have a meal together. This is most likely driven by lack of facilities, but it could also be a symptom of lack of fellowship in general. Either they have no “where” to eat together or they have no “why” to sit down with each other for a meal.

At Northland Baptist Church we struggled with the issue of having a real meal together for several years. We were convinced that this was the practice that we wanted, but we did not have a place to have the meal. We

the Lord’s Supper. This time is meant to ensure that the person partaking of the supper is not doing so in an unworthy manner. While this practice is commendable, this is not what Paul is discussing in this passage. Paul is imploring the Corinthians to treat each other as equals at the supper as members of the body of Christ, and while we should have a time of introspection at the supper, this is not Paul’s intent in this passage.

eventually remodeled our sanctuary to remove the pews and replace them with chairs so that we could use this large space for a meal. It was during Easter weekend of 2017 that we were able to finally have a full meal for the Lord's Supper. As our people gathered on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday we broke bread (fried chicken, mashed potatoes, etc.) together and celebrated the Lord's Supper. After we ate our meal, we had a time of teaching and then partook of the bread and the cup at each table. It was a wonderful time of fellowship as the church expressed and lived out the unity that is found in Christ. We also found that we did not have to manufacture a sense of unity at the meal, as the meal itself created unity.

Another option that allows people to experience a full meal for the Supper is to let your small groups have the Supper during a meal at someone's house. This option would allow for a church that does not have a large enough facility to seat everyone at once to still have a real meal for the Supper. It also allows the small groups in your church to see their unity as grounded in Christ and not just a sense of fellowship or shared life experience.

One critique of having the Supper in a small group is that a pastor could not be at every meal, but there is nothing in Scripture that would demand the presence of a pastor at the meal. This appears historically to be a result of the rise of the bishopric and the consolidation of the church under an episcopal model. Baptists are not bound by this historical trend, and while a pastor does not have to be present to validate the Supper, it would be wise and prudent for the church to make it clear that the Supper being taken in small groups is not an attempt to create a splinter group within the church, but is endorsed by the leadership. This is necessary given the historical precedent of the Supper and its community forming basis. To overcome the objections raised by tradition, there could also be a biblical basis for partaking of the Supper in homes, as seen in Acts 2:46. Luke writes that the believers would meet in the Temple complex and then break bread from house to house.²⁵ In this context the church gathered as a large body for worship and then met in smaller groups to break bread—to have the Lord's Supper.

A serious challenge of having a full meal for the Lord's Supper is that it is logistically almost impossible for churches to have a meal together in their facilities as we experienced at Northland. Even with the remodel to the sanctuary it would no be possible to have a full meal on a Sunday morning. Therefore, in addition to having a real meal for the Supper in small groups and occasionally as the whole congregation, the traditional manner of having the Supper in the Sunday morning service could be continued. This experience would be deepened and enriched by those Suppers that were real meals and would help the church to see the full meal in the symbolic meal. It could also be encouraged during this time to greet the people around you and to partake of the bread and cup together, as if you were sharing a meal together, which is in fact what we are doing. By giving permission to the members of

²⁵Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 72.

the congregation to fellowship with each while the bread and cup are distributed it will capture something of the fellowship that takes place over a full meal. In this way, the communal nature of the meal can be experienced, even if in a diminished manner.

There are numerous benefits of resetting the stage decoration from a symbolic meal into a real meal. First, the church's mandate to carry out discipline could be more effectively enforced. In Roman Catholic doctrine, excommunication from the Mass is enough to cause a member to reconsider his or her behavior. According to Catholic doctrine, the Mass carries with it the grace that is needed to continue on in one's salvation. In typical Baptist doctrine, the meal does not carry the same theological grist, hence a Baptist may not recognize the immensity of being barred from taking the Lord's Supper. I imagine that most Baptists would not consider it a heavy penalty to be asked not to partake of the wafer and cup that is offered at the end of a service once a quarter or evenly monthly. Missing a meal, however, would be a different matter. If a group of believers gathered together regularly to eat a meal and a person was excluded from that event, they would feel more deeply the loss of community with the group.²⁶ This would also affect those who have to exclude someone, and this is part of the point of church discipline. Discipline is not intended to remove someone who is causing trouble, but to save someone who is endangering both themselves and the church-community. In an intervention, the family and friends who intervene often suffer as much, if not more, than the person who is behaving in an unacceptable manner.

Second, by having a real meal, divisions in the body of Christ can be more easily detected and remedied. It was at the meal in Corinth that the divisions in the church were evident, and Paul instructs the church to put aside these table divisions and eat together in unity. There is often no better place to recognize the true feelings we have toward someone than over food. It is in that context that we will be better able to sense any conflicts and then attempt to remedy them as we share in the one loaf and cup that symbolize Christ. The unity that Christ gives will be the impetus to overcome the divisions that are made evident over a meal.

Finally, and this almost goes with saying, eating together binds us closer to each other. God created us and He knows us, so it is not surprising that we find God using meals throughout Scripture to commune with us and for us to commune with each other. While church members often go out to eat with each other after a worship service, there is seldom a time when we eat together in the recognition that we are the body of Christ. What better way both to display and to build the unity of the body of Christ than by eating a meal together in which we remember the body and blood of Christ given for us and look forward to His return. In the eager expectation of His return

²⁶In 1 Corinthians 5:11 Paul admonished the church not to eat with someone who proclaims to be a follower of Christ, but who is not living by that claim.

to share a meal with us, we will find that we are drawn closer to Him and to each other. It is my recommendation that we reset the modern stage decoration of the Lord's Supper as a wafer and tiny cup into a full meal so that we can more fittingly see our church's Supper table as a place to exhibit our unity in Christ.