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Readers' Guide: Literary Resources for the Lord's Supper

by Craig Churchill

William Willimon has observed that Christians cannot say all we might like to about our experience of the Lord's Supper—nor should we attempt to. The event itself is too rich and varied for words to adequately express. We might paraphrase Willimon to add that neither can we mention all of the helpful literature concerning the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper—at least not in one brief essay. The following resources have established themselves as particularly significant works which educated laypersons and ministers can use with profit in their efforts to come to a deeper appreciation for this central act of Christian worship.

I begin by mentioning two reference works that contain helpful introductory articles and bibliographies on the Lord's Supper. These are good beginning places for interested individuals to become oriented with the issues discussed in other works. Next, I survey nine books which focus specifically on the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper. I then look at four general works on worship which contain solid sections on the Lord's Supper and conclude by noting two periodical issues containing pertinent articles in this connection.

Reference Works

The Complete Library of Christian Worship (Nashville: Star Song, 1994), edited by Robert E. Webber, purposes to “make biblical, historical,

and contemporary resources on worship available to pastors, music ministers, worship committees, and the motivated individual worshipper” (Introduction, xii). This seven-volume reference work includes essays from various religious traditions including contributors from the Stone-Campbell Movement. Typical worship themes around which material is organized include the biblical foundations of worship, historical and theological development of worship, resources for worship and preaching, and resources for the services of the Christian year. Volume six, the “Sacred Actions of Christian Worship,” includes helpful sections on the Lord's Supper in part four (with chapters on history, theologies, and practice). While cost prohibitive for many individuals (\$50 per volume), the set would make an excellent addition to church libraries. All who are involved in worship planning for the local church will benefit from this clearly written and well-organized “library.”

The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), edited by J. G. Davies is a substantial revision of an earlier edition first published in 1972. This is an outstanding reference work with concise summary articles on all aspects of worship, and contributors are drawn from diverse religious traditions. On the negative side, the work suffers from inadequate cross-references. Thus, a person who looks up the entry under “Lord's Supper, The” gets no indication

that a more comprehensive and related article can be found under "Eucharist." Nevertheless, the careful user will work through such inconveniences and find this to be an immensely useful resource. It is also much less expensive than Webber's more wide-ranging work, affordable to interested individuals as well as libraries.

Books on the Lord's Supper

Two works which specifically develop New Testament teaching on the Lord's Supper, without tracing the development of its practice in the early church, stand out among their kind. **Last Supper and Lord's Supper** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993; Repr. of 1980 ed.) by I. H. Marshall may well be the best introduction currently in print. A Methodist, Marshall's theology of the Lord's Supper has been described as near-Zwinglian. This low-sacramentalism, coupled with what many would describe as Marshall's high view of scripture, results in a work that will evoke a sympathetic hearing among those in Churches of Christ. In this case, such a hearing would be amply rewarded.

A. J. B. Higgins' **The Lord's Supper in the New Testament** (London: SCM Press, 1952) was perhaps the best introduction to New Testament teaching on the Lord's Supper for three decades after its publication. It remains an invaluable aid for serious Bible students today and is superseded only by Marshall's work. The author resists focusing too narrowly on any one particular theological dimension of the supper to the exclusion of others. Thus, just as the Passover celebration caused Jews to look backward at redemption in Egypt and forward to future deliverance, so also the supper enjoins Christians to both remember Christ's sacrifice on our behalf and anticipate his future return in glory. This observation serves as a needed reminder for those who would struggle to recapture something of the "forward-looking expectancy," hope, and joy so characteristic of early Christian communities.

Some in Churches of Christ have neglected this eschatological dimension of the Lord's Supper. Thus, Geoffrey Wainwright's **Eucharist and Eschatology** (NY.: Oxford, 1981) can serve as a stringent corrective to an unfortunate imbalance. Images of the messianic feast, the coming of Christ, and the first fruits of the kingdom figure prominently in Wainwright's discussion, and he gives special attention to texts like I Corinthians 11:26 (where Paul asserts that the supper proclaims the Lord's death *until he come*). The author's reflections on the implications for neglecting these aspects of the supper merit careful consideration and help make for a welcome addition to any library.

Less thorough than either Marshall or Higgins, but valuable in its own right, is Markus Barth's **Rediscovering the Lord's Supper** (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988). Barth views historical-critical scholarship as a potential ally in the effort to forge unity amidst divided communions. He substitutes careful exegesis of biblical texts for philosophical and metaphysical speculation which, in his judgment, do not address the real needs of people in the pews and complicate our understanding of the Lord's Supper. For those in religious communions which have grown accustomed to language like "transubstantiation" and "consubstantiation," the "Supper has been wrapped in a smokescreen of very difficult language" (2). Sacramental mysticism draws attention "away from the one true mystery: the love of God poured out in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit upon Jews and Gentiles, upon those near and those afar" (47).

While sacramental mysticism is less of a problem in Churches of Christ than in many communions, Barth's censure of all forms of individualism that detract from the inherent social character of the meal is more applicable. And surely some in Churches of Christ are guilty of practicing our own form of sacramentalism when we assume that by meeting our weekly requirement at the table we are in good standing with God. Barth's struggle to describe the relationship between our participation in the Lord's Supper and the living of our daily lives is also helpful. The following observation is typical:

In the Lord's Supper *all* is ethical; however, only *evangelical* ethics—not legalistic ethics—fit and express the praise that Christians owe to God and the testimony that they are to give to each other and to those who do not yet believe in God as revealed through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit (76).

William Willimon has written a number of excellent books relating to ministry and worship. Among these, is **Sunday Dinner: the Lord's Supper and the Christian Life** (Nashville: Upper Room, 1981) which, as the title suggests, focuses on our time together around the table each Sunday morning. Included are a series of ten sermon-like chapters exploring various aspects of the supper, a guide for group discussions by John Westerhoff III, and scripture and subject indexes. The result is a thought-provoking work that is both substantive and practical.

One dominant theme which resurfaces throughout Willimon's work is the backdrop of joy

against which the supper is cast for Christians. Willimon laments that our services can become "more like memorials of God's absence rather than celebrations of God's presence." The antidote is the supper where "we move from lamentation of our misdeeds to celebration of God's deeds in Jesus Christ" (94-95). Willimon makes a mistake, in my judgment, in compartmentalizing the roles of the sermon and the supper (for Willimon, preaching leads to lament while the supper fosters celebration), but his overall point is well-taken. Though we gather as sinners around the table, we are *redeemed* sinners; this distinction is cause for immeasurable joy and gratitude which sustains us through the week. Additionally, Willimon is correct to criticize the tendency in many corners of Protestantism to overemphasize the sermon at the expense of the supper. Implications for planning and designing our worship services, as well as for ordering our daily disciplines (cf. the value of fasting for instance, 65-69) abound throughout this fine book.

Around the Lord's Table, ed. by A.B. Lipscomb (Gospel Advocate, 1917; Rev. and reprinted by John T. Hinds, 1934) is a collection of twenty-six articles concerning the Lord's Supper by prominent Church of Christ leaders ranging from Alexander Campbell to Batsell Barrett Baxter. As such, it provides an excellent window into the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper in Churches of Christ over the years. Representative selections include "Importance of the Supper" by E.G. Sewell, "The Proper Observance" by T.B. Larimore, "The Periodical Observance" by G. Dallas Smith, "Lord's Supper a Divine Institution," by Alexander Campbell and a concluding section on "Song Hints" by E. Gaston Collins.

In concluding this section on books which have the Lord's Supper as their focus, I would add two works that are viewed as standards in the field: both are more difficult to work through than the previous books surveyed but are well worth the effort for those with sufficient time and inclination.

Dom Gregory Dix's **The Shape of the Liturgy**, Rev. and expanded by Paul V. Marshall (New York: Seabury, 1982), has been described as one of the greatest Christian literary achievements of the twentieth century. Dix, an Episcopalian, has produced a non-sectarian treatise which has emerged as the starting point for assessing the theology and development of the Lord's Supper. Likewise, some call Joachim Jeremias' **The Eucharistic Words of Jesus**, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), the most significant contemporary study of the events and sayings surrounding the last supper (which both Jeremias and Dix consider directly related to the

Lord's Supper). Though one can easily become confused amidst a sea of various possibilities, probabilities, and conjectures concerning matters of chronology, or determinations of which biblical account of the supper is the oldest, this is an invaluable discussion.

Broader Works on Worship

To this point I have mentioned resources which have dealt specifically with the Lord's Supper. There are a number of excellent treatments, however, which are included in broader works on worship. Four of these are mentioned here.

A useful starting point for assessing the meaning and significance of the Lord's Supper is provided in select chapters of Everett Ferguson's **Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries**, Rev. ed. (Abilene: ACU Press, 1987; chaps. 8-11). The book is exceptionally well-organized, and the author has succeeded in making the fruits of his scholarly work in biblical and patristic studies accessible to the lepers.

Ferguson begins each chapter with citations from the New Testament and excerpts from pertinent patristic sources, proceeds with a discussion and evaluation of the evidence, and concludes each section with bibliography and notes. He directs these studies to those "who know the early church only from the New Testament," (10) in hopes that the early patristic witness and practice can enrich that perspective.

Throughout these chapters Ferguson underscores the central role of the Lord's Supper in the worship of the early church. He concludes that the dominant emphases of the church's practice were thanksgiving, remembrance of Christ's atoning sacrifice, fellowship of the saints, and eschatological hopes concerning the Lord's return. The early emphasis on thanksgiving was only later superseded by sacrificial imagery, and clear distinctions were made between the church's sacrifice and that of Christ.

Ralph Martin has written extensively concerning the worship of the Church, and **Worship in the Early Church**, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), remains one of his finest contributions. The book opens, appropriately, with a chapter on "The Church - A Worshipping Community," and continues with chapters on such themes as "Prayers and Praise of the New Testament," "Hymns and Spiritual Songs," and "The Ministry of the Word." Chapters 10-11 develop the teaching on the Lord's Supper within the broader worship context, and a concluding chapter concerning "Later Developments of Christian Worship" rounds out an outstanding work.

C. K. Barrett's, **Church, Ministry, & Sacraments in the New Testament** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) contains a series of lectures on the ministry and sacraments of the early church by a noted New Testament scholar. The lecture format precludes heavy use of footnotes and contributes to a sensitive treatment that is highly readable and should have lasting value.

Well over a century has passed since Robert Richardson wrote **Communings in the Sanctuary** (Lexington, KY: Transylvania, 1872). Best known as Alexander Campbell's biographer, Richardson (1806-1896) was a remarkable figure in his own right, and this exquisite devotional work deserves to be revived for our benefit today (a reprint is badly needed). Despite the somewhat archaic language, judicious selections would make excellent readings for our time around the table together. Reflections like, "How many thus enter into the sanctuary of God, without any realizing sense of the divine presence!" (9) are no less applicable for contemporary believers than they were for Richardson's audience. The flavor of Richardson's thought is captured in the following quote:

This loaf, this cup of blessing, these appropriate elements—lifeless, but life-sustaining—speak of Him who became lifeless that we might live by Him. It is in these that faith beholds that celestial manna, that living food, that bread of heaven, which gives life to the world, and sustains the soul amidst the conflict against the powers of death. And these sacred emblems shall continue to publish in every land, and amidst all the nations and tribes of earth, the dying love and life-giving power of Jesus, until death itself is swallowed up in victory (58-9).

Truly, our congregations could do worse with more shallow and less reflective readings no matter how contemporary.

Periodical Articles

Several helpful articles concerning the Lord's Supper, and worship in general, have appeared in periodicals over the last few years. Here I wish to direct the reader's attention to two issues focusing on worship which appeared in Church of Christ periodicals.

The cover of the Winter 1990 issue of **Leaven**

bore the caption, "All Things Praise Thee, Lord May We . . ." The articles addressed, as one author put it, the question "why is worship so important in the life of God's people?" (6). The prominence which the Lord's Supper receives throughout the issue gives some indication as to the pivotal role and significance which contributors grant the supper within the larger corporate worship experience. Especially noteworthy is Randy Chestnutt's, "Passover, Last Supper, and Lord's Supper: Jewish Elements for Christian Reclamation," (15-20), in which the author discusses the importance of the Passover setting of Jesus' last supper with the disciples. Chestnutt's article would serve as a useful primer to portions of both Marshall and Jeremias' works.

A recent issue of **Christian Studies** (13/1993), published by the faculty of the Institute for Christian Studies, was likewise devoted to worship concerns. The issue was presented, as the editor put it, "with a view toward aiding readers to sort through the present confusion regarding worship" (4). While the Lord's Supper did not receive special emphasis, the issues raised have broader application for all aspects of worship—including the supper—and should stimulate the reader's thought throughout.

Conclusion

In closing, the reader is reminded that this survey is by no means exhaustive. The bibliographical aids included in the works mentioned here suggest other resources for pursuing select areas of interest in greater detail. None of these resources is intended as a substitute for serious Bible study. Rather, these are simply aids, intended to lead believers more deeply into the biblical texts and the subsequent interpretation of those texts.

Years ago, Joseph Henry Thayer refuted the idea that serious biblical study has a narrowing effect on readers. He suggested that the person of one book becomes, of necessity, the person of many books—when that one book is the Bible. I share Thayer's conviction that avid Bible students will welcome any resources that can lead to a deeper appreciation for the biblical witness, and help believers appropriate that witness in their own lives. May this essay help the reader identify worthy "conversation partners" with whom to engage in fruitful discussion of the Lord's Supper.

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