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A COMPREHENSIVE ORDINANCE: A BIBLICAL,  
THEOLOGICAL, AND FORMATIONAL CASE  
FOR THREEFOLD COMMUNION

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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Master of Theology

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by  
Zachary David Hess  
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**APPROVAL SHEET**

A COMPREHENSIVE ORDINANCE: A BIBLICAL,  
THEOLOGICAL, AND FORMATIONAL CASE  
FOR THREEFOLD COMMUNION

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To Dr. David Plaster

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## PREFACE

Threefold Communion is part of my history and conviction as a member of the Charis Fellowship. I witnessed the practice as a boy and now gladly celebrate it with my church. This thesis is for our family of churches, and I hope it reaffirms our convictions. I have many in our Fellowship to thank, several of them now with the Lord, but their legacy inspired me to pursue further studies. Others, especially my Grace Polaris Church family, enabled this project. Their prayers and support provided the strength to persevere.

I hold The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the highest regard and count it a privilege to study with such an esteemed faculty. I express my deep gratitude to Dr. Gregg Allison and Torey Teer for reassuring and stretching me with invaluable insight and encouragement. In God's kind providence, he provided friendship through Timothy Ingrum, Ross Macdonald, and Chris Chen. These brothers provided spiritual and theological community despite our distance.

I knew undertaking another degree would create challenges for my young family, especially my wife Sarah, who would endure a particular weight and responsibility. I never expected how much we would grow as a family. God has blessed us with wonderful conversation, growth, and sweetness. I owe these blessings to Sarah, who adorns the beauty of Christ.

Zac Hess

Columbus, Ohio

May 2022

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Communion is more significant than most believers realize. The sign is rich with spiritual significance, and its benefit for the church requires an appropriate application. Communion is a comprehensive sign for the Christian life as it celebrates the past, present, and future work of Christ. The Holy Spirit also uses this ordinance to transform and unite the church. However, the practice of Communion in many churches leaves many church members missing the richness of the Lord's Supper. Church leaders should consider if their application of Communion fosters and reveals its beauty.

#### **Thesis**

I will argue that Threefold Communion—consisting of the love feast<sup>1</sup>, footwashing<sup>2</sup>, and bread and cup<sup>3</sup>—is the best application of the Lord's Supper in light of its biblical evidence, theological symbolism, and formational benefit. The practice has a biblical foundation as the commands of Jesus inspire the example of the early church. It is also a practice rich with theological symbolism as the church celebrates God's past work of redemption, celebrates his present work of transformation, and anticipates his future work of consummation. Finally, Threefold Communion has a formational benefit as it fosters the Holy Spirit's work to transform and unite the church.

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<sup>1</sup> The love feast is a full meal that provides the context for the church to gather and is the theological symbol of glorification.

<sup>2</sup> Footwashing is the literal washing of feet and is the theological symbol of sanctification.

<sup>3</sup> The bread and cup is the eating of bread and the drinking of wine/juice to remember and proclaim the Christ's death and is the theological symbol of justification.

## Methodology

As a work of systematic theology, I will advance my thesis through the following methods:

*Historical precedent.* Church history is not on the same authority as the Bible, yet it does inform modern understanding of ancient practices. This thesis will highlight evidence from the early church and show how Threefold Communion is a consistent identity marker of a fellowship of churches dating back to post-Reformation Germany.

*Theological agreement.* I recognize that Threefold Communion is a peculiar practice compared to other applications of the Lord's Supper. However, I show points of biblical and theological agreement with other positions. The biblical and theological foundation for Threefold Communion should be familiar to all believers even if there is disagreement in the application.

*Mode reflects doctrine.* All theology must lead to worship and church transformation.<sup>4</sup> Theology leads application, and church practices reveal real or perceived convictions on the Lord's Supper. After rehearsing the theological foundations, I will show that Threefold Communion is a faithful application of the Lord's Supper that best reflects the theological foundations of Communion.

## Significance

This thesis serves two primary purposes: First, I hope this project gives Charis Fellowship<sup>5</sup> pastors and churches confidence in the biblical, theological, and practical reasoning of Threefold Communion so they can teach and practice it within their local churches. Along with a renewed conviction, I encourage Charis Fellowship pastors to be

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<sup>4</sup> Fred Sanders, *The Triune God*, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 25. Sanders writes, "All theology is doxology," and I believe this must lead to church transformation.

<sup>5</sup> The Charis Fellowship, formerly known as the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches, is a fellowship of approximately 250 churches in North America and a member of a worldwide fellowship known as the Charis Alliance that has several thousand churches worldwide. I explain the history of Threefold Communion in the Charis Fellowship and Brethren movement later in this thesis. Insecurity over Threefold Communion is growing in our Fellowship, and I pray for a humble celebration and recommitment of this rich practice.

more willing to see the Holy Spirit's unique work through the Threefold Communion service. Understanding the Holy Spirit's role in Threefold Communion might cultivate a more profound reverence for the service. Second, I desire this project explains Threefold Communion to those outside our movement of churches. I do not expect to convince everyone, but I hope those unfamiliar will recognize and appreciate the biblical, theological, and practical foundations for Threefold Communion.

### **Argument**

In chapter 2, I trace Threefold Communion historically through the Brethren movement. This chapter shows how Threefold Communion has been a consistent conviction of the Charis Fellowship dating back to its genesis in Germany in 1708.

In chapter 3, I trace the multidimensional nature of Passover and Communion. This chapter will show how Passover and Communion have past, present, and future themes. This chapter helps those not yet convinced of Threefold Communion understand that the practice is consistent with the theological views of others in the Christian faith.

In chapter 4, I make the case that Threefold Communion is the best application in light of the past, present, and future themes introduced in the previous chapter. This chapter is the center of the argument for Threefold Communion as a church practice.

In chapter 5, I summarize the work of the Holy Spirit to transform believers and unite the church through Communion and then show how Threefold Communion is the best practice to foster the Holy Spirit's activity. This discussion is a unique contribution compared to previous explanations of Threefold Communion.

In chapter 6, I restate my thesis and conclude the argument with closing reflections.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORY OF THREEFOLD COMMUNION IN THE CHARIS FELLOWSHIP

The Brethren movement began in Schwarzenau, Germany, in 1708 under Alexander Mack's leadership. Mack was raised in a Reformed home in Schreisheim and eventually came under Radical Pietist and Anabaptist teaching.<sup>1</sup> The Reformed, Pietist, and Anabaptist lines impacted Mack and the Brethren, yet he remained committed to biblical authority as primary over other allegiances. The Brethren commitment to the authority of the Scripture allowed them to accept beneficial truths from several movements without embracing everything taught by a particular group.<sup>2</sup> Historian Todd Scoles captures their collective makeup as he writes about the Brethren desire to return to the primitive church of the New Testament:

They gratefully acknowledged the insight of [Martin] Luther, the courage of [Conrad] Grebel, the devotion of [Phillip] Spener, and the passion of a [Ernst] Hochmann, but they would not make any of them the authority for their practice of the faith. They tried to judge the doctrines and patterns of humans by the Word of God, keeping the pieces they deemed true in the comparison and discarding the rest.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> W. G. Willoughby, "Mack, Alexander," in *The Brethren Encyclopedia*, ed. Donald F. Durnbaugh (Philadelphia: Brethren Encyclopedia, 1983), 2:775.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Julien, "Brethrenism and Creeds," *Grace Theological Journal* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1985): 373. The authority of Scripture is a key tenet of the Brethren faith, which rejected other authorities, such as creeds. Julien claims that this commitment to Scripture remains an essential commitment of the Brethren: "The most distinguishing mark of the Brethren movement has been its vigorous opposition to creedalism and its commitment to the Bible as its sole authority." The commitment to Scripture did not absolve the Brethren from challenges with tradition. Richard Gardner recognizes the tendency to appeal to tradition: "The authority of the traditions that Brethren have developed has proven a more difficult issue than the traditions of other churches. In 1857 a query came to the Annual Meeting, 'Would it not be better in deciding upon all subjects . . . to refer first to the Word of God, instead of referring to the old minutes?'" Richard B. Gardner, "Bible," in Durnbaugh, *Brethren Encyclopedia*, 1:133. Over time, some Brethren groups saw a need to create formal statements of faith; however, the Bible alone is authoritative.

<sup>3</sup> Todd Scoles, *Restoring the Household: The Quest of the Grace Brethren Church* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 2008), 78.

The Brethren were imperfect people, and their lack of theological center proved challenging over time. Nevertheless, their commitment to the Word of God provided a filter for things they heard from other theological voices of their day. In this chapter, I will trace the beliefs of Threefold Communion from the founder of the Brethren movement, Alexander Mack, to the Charis Fellowship.<sup>4</sup> Through examining Mack's writing, local church practices, and several confessional documents, it will be evident that Threefold Communion is a historical and contemporary identity maker of churches with Brethren beginnings.<sup>5</sup>

### **Alexander Mack and Threefold Communion**

Mack was a miller and not a formally trained clergyman at his Anabaptist awakening. Nevertheless, Mack was committed to Scripture, and his Reformed heritage is likely what kept him grounded despite some of the mystical practices of Radical Pietism.<sup>6</sup> The Anabaptist church model of regenerate membership and believers baptism was a key influencer, especially in applying the ordinances.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Mack taught against infant baptism and believed that only professing adults should be baptized by trine immersion since there is no biblical example of a baptized child.<sup>8</sup> To practice the ordinances with theological consistency, Mack believed that only baptized believers should participate in communion: "The true Householder, Jesus Christ, commanded this only of the members of His household who have entered the Kingdom through true

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<sup>4</sup> The Charis Fellowship was formerly known as the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches.

<sup>5</sup> This historical section will focus on the historical development in the Charis Fellowship and will not include an extensive discussion on modern expressions of other Brethren groups (i.e., Brethren Church and Church of the Brethren).

<sup>6</sup> Scoles, *Restoring the Household*, 75-76. The Reformed emphases of *sola Scriptura*, *sola fidei*, and the priesthood of believers were major influences on the Brethren. However, Scoles notes that the Reformed embrace of the state church was too much for the Brethren (76).

<sup>7</sup> Scoles, *Restoring the Household*, 76.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Mack, "Rights and Ordinances," in *The Complete Writings of Alexander Mack*, ed. William Eberly (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1991), 49-50, 58.

repentance and faith and baptism, and who willingly keep all of the rules of the Householder in obedience of faith.”<sup>9</sup>

Ascertaining when Mack embraced Threefold Communion as his conviction is difficult. Radical Pietist Ernst Christopher Hochmann may have influenced Mack’s thinking since Hochmann was a spiritual mentor to Mack.<sup>10</sup> While Hochman was in a Nürnberg prison cell, Mack and George Grebe wrote to him about trine immersion and other church practices. Hochmann addressed their questions and warned of the cost of believer’s baptism, and he also included a comment about the love feast of Communion: “I have the same opinion concerning the Lord’s love feast—the foundation must be based on the love of Jesus and the appropriate community of members. I will not oppose it, if they want to hold the outward love feast in the memory of the Lord Jesus, as it corresponds with the Scriptures in every respect.”<sup>11</sup>

Mack did not write extensively, but he made his convictions about Threefold Communion clear. The following is his most explicit statement:

Now, blind reason can (if it but wanted!) indeed recognize and make the differentiation that an evening meal could not mean a noon meal. As early as Paul’s time the people came together and held the supper. But Paul says (1 Corinthians 11:20) that they did not [really] hold the Lord’s Supper. When, however, the believers gathered in united love and fellowship and had a supper, observing thereby the commandments of the Lord Jesus that they wash one another’s feet after the example and order of the Master (John 13:14, 15), yes, when they broke the bread of communion, drank the chalice (the cup) of communion, proclaimed the death and suffering of Jesus, praised and glorified His great love for them, and exhorted one another to bear the cross and endure suffering, to follow after their Lord and Master, to remain true to all of His commandments, to resist earnestly all

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<sup>9</sup> Mack, “Rights and Ordinances,” 61.

<sup>10</sup> Dale Stoffer, *Background and Development of Brethren Doctrines, 1650-2015*, 2nd ed., Brethren Encyclopedia Monograph Series 8 (Philadelphia: Brethren Encyclopedia, 2018), 68. Even though Mack was influenced by several radical thinkers of the day, his belief in the authority of the Word kept him anchored. Mack’s understanding of the local church showed enough structure that it was indefinable but was also relational enough to be a family.

<sup>11</sup> Donald F. Durnbaugh, *European Origins of the Brethren Church: A Source Book on the Beginnings of the Church of the Brethren in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1958), 113.

sins, to love one another truly, and to lie together in peace and unity—that alone could be called the Lord’s Supper.<sup>12</sup>

The Lord’s Supper was more than an individual rite of passage or sign for Mack and the early Brethren. Instead, Communion was an opportunity for the whole church to gather in unity and love. Unfortunately, the early Brethren paid the price for their unique convictions as they endured persecution from the established churches of their day.<sup>13</sup>

### **Henry Holsinger on Threefold Communion**

The Brethren eventually emigrated to America for the sake of religious freedom. The first group arrived in 1719, and the last made their way in 1733.<sup>14</sup> The congregations took some time to gather themselves and mature in their new homeland, but eventually they assembled themselves as local churches. The practice of Threefold Communion proved challenging and irregular in America, as an entire year may elapse without an observance.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, despite changes and debates about the order of the service, Threefold Communion remained the practice of the Brethren in America.

Henry Holsinger was a Brethren historian and Progressive Brethren leader in the late nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> He extensively describes the Threefold Communion gathering. This assembly was no ordinary meal but a high celebratory season for brothers and sisters in Christ to commune together. It was a holy and reverent occasion, and God

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<sup>12</sup> Mack, “Rights and Ordinances,” 62.

<sup>13</sup> Durnbaugh, *European Origins of the Brethren Church*, 129. The Brethren endured criticism for embracing regenerate communion and including both the love feast and the footwashing. This critique shows up in a letter from Johann George Gichtel in 1709, less than a year after the initial start of the Brethren movement under Mack. Gichtel ended his letter with the following: “After ending this [letter] I have received a detailed report about the new Anabaptists in the Schwarzenau area. They also observe footwashing and communion, but refuse to let anyone participate who has not been baptized by them with water. And because all new sectarianism produces zeal, this is also true with them. When, however, this fiery ardor has burned down, then the zeal will lessen of itself” (quoted in Durnbaugh, 129).

<sup>14</sup> Albert T. Ronk, *History of the Brethren Church: Its Life, Thought, and Mission* (Ashland, OH: Brethren, 1968), 63.

<sup>15</sup> Stoffer, *Background and Development of Brethren Doctrines*, 95.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Clouse, “Holsinger, Henry Ritz,” in Durnbaugh, *Brethren Encyclopedia*, 1:621. Holsinger’s *History of the Tunkers and the Brethren Church* (Lathrop, CA: Pacific Press, 1901) remains an essential contribution to understanding the Brethren movement.

was clearly in their midst. It seems like the gathering was a collection or district of churches from the surrounding area, rather than just one local church, that met for an entire weekend once per year.<sup>17</sup>

The weekend included the love feast on Saturday afternoon, followed by footwashing, an extended time for examination and spiritual preparation, followed by the communion of the bread and cup.<sup>18</sup>

While Holsinger's reflections on Threefold Communion are noteworthy and inspirational, he also details a monumental split within the Brethren movement in the 1880s that created three separate Brethren groups.<sup>19</sup> For this section, the most significant mention is that his new progressive fellowship committed itself to the practice of Threefold Communion:<sup>20</sup>

(1) That feet-washing is a divine institution, and should be practiced in the public worship by all saints, in connection with the Lord's Supper. (2) That the Lord's Supper is a full evening meal, and is to be eaten in the night, as a divine institution, in the public worship of God, in connection with the communion of bread and wine. (3) That the eating of communion bread and the drinking of the communion wine, in connection with the Lord's Supper, is a divine ordinance, to be thus kept and obeyed by the church in her public worship.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Holsinger, *History of the Tunkers and the Brethren Church*, 249-50.

<sup>18</sup> Holsinger, *History of the Tunkers and the Brethren Church*, 250.

<sup>19</sup> Scoles, *Restoring the Household*, 153-77. Cf. David R. Plaster, *Finding Our Focus: A History of the Grace Brethren Church* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 2003), 49-87. Scoles outlines several issues led to the split within the fellowship: (1) Church government: The Progressives wanted autonomous churches with congregationalism, while the Conservatives wanted the Annual Meeting to have more authority in the churches. (2) Relationship to culture: The Progressives wanted to reach the surrounding culture by starting Sunday Schools and revival meetings, paying pastors, and accommodating their dress; the Old Orders wanted to remain separate from the culture and maintain their primitive practices to keep a pure church. (3) Doctrinal framework: The lack of statements of faith and creeds proved challenging for the Brethren as differing interpretations arose. The Progressives encouraged theological education for ministers, and the Conservatives and Old Orders remained committed to the Bible alone as the creed. The division during these years created three different Brethren groups: (1) The Old Orders remained separate from society. (2) The Progressives remained committed to the Bible but wanted to change methods to reach the society. The Progressive eventually became the Brethren Church and the Charis Fellowship. (3) The Conservatives were the largest group at the time and tried to find a middle ground between the Old Orders and Progressives.

<sup>20</sup> The Progressive Brethren used the term "Progressive" as a cultural term to recognize their desire to adapt to the culture around them for the sake of evangelism and mission instead of remaining isolated from their neighbors.

<sup>21</sup> Holsinger, *History of the Tunkers and the Brethren Church*, 546.

Despite the progressive and culturally adaptable trend in the new group of Brethren churches, Threefold Communion was not debated, and the new fellowship remained committed to the historic practice.

### **Confessional Documents and a New Fellowship**

From 1708 all Brethren groups have all committed themselves to Threefold Communion. Since the 1800s, the practice was virtually untested, and Threefold Communion remained a central identity marker for the Progressive Brethren in the late nineteenth century. In addition, the Brethren rejected anything except the New Testament as their creed, making theological consistency challenging to find.<sup>22</sup> Finally, however, a confessional statement was drafted in the wake of several controversies at Ashland Seminary.

The controversies at Ashland College and Seminary led to a division in the Brethren church in 1937. Debates about modernism, Calvinism, fundamentalism, confessionalism, and personality clashes led to a separation within Ashland Seminary.<sup>23</sup> The two fired professors, Alva J. McClain and Herman Hoyt, led a movement to start a new seminary called Grace Theological Seminary.<sup>24</sup> The existence of two seminaries eventually split the fellowship of churches and the national organizations. As with most splits, ugly lawsuits over church property followed and eventually led to separate national conferences, separate publishing houses, and fractured relationships.<sup>25</sup> The new

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<sup>22</sup> Carl Trueman makes a compelling case for the necessity of confessions of faith even when there is agreement on biblical authority. See Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 160

<sup>23</sup> Space does not allow for a detailed description of the events that led to the split in the denomination. The division at Ashland Seminary led to the beginning of the new seminary called Grace Theological Seminary. Brethren churches that supported the new seminary eventually became known as the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches, now known as the Charis Fellowship. Churches that continued supporting Ashland Theological Seminary remained part of the Brethren Church.

<sup>24</sup> Plaster, *Finding Our Focus*, 109-25.

<sup>25</sup> Plaster, *Finding Our Focus*, 127-37.

fellowship initially called The National Fellowship of Brethren Churches eventually became known as Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches.<sup>26</sup> Threefold Communion was not part of the debate despite these differences.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Message of the Brethren Ministry**

While teaching at Ashland, McClain drafted the Message of the Brethren Ministry to bring clarity and theological precision to the seminary and for pastors in the Brethren Church. After the split in the denomination, The National Fellowship of Brethren Churches continued to use the Message of the Brethren Ministry as their confessional document. The Message of the Brethren Ministry maintained a belief and practice of Threefold Communion along with other symbols the church should observe: (1) Baptism of Believers by Trine Immersion; (2) Confirmation; (3) the Lord's Supper; (4) the Communion of the Bread and Wine; (5) the Washing of the Saints' Feet; and (6) the Anointing of the Sick with Oil.<sup>28</sup> The statement does not elaborate on these beliefs, but they capture the essence of Brethren conviction and practice.<sup>29</sup>

### **Grace Brethren Statement of Faith**

In 1969, the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches unanimously ratified a new statement of faith that clarified their position on the ordinances: "The Christians should observe the ordinances of our Lord Jesus Christ which are (1) baptism of believers

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<sup>26</sup> Plaster, *Finding Our Focus*, 152-65. Plaster clarifies the separation: "Contrary to popular opinion, no new denomination came into being in 1939. Official separation did not come until July 1986, when the Grace Brethren finally incorporated as the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches" (127).

<sup>27</sup> An examination of the Message of the Brethren Ministry, the Covenant and Statement of Faith for the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches, and the Charis Commitment to Common Identity reveals that Threefold Communion remains a vital identity marker for the Charis Fellowship.

<sup>28</sup> Scoles, *Restoring the Household*, 249.

<sup>29</sup> David R. Plaster, *Ordinances: What Are They?* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1985), 46. Plaster clarifies that although the Laying on of Hands (confirmation) and Anointing of the Sick have appeared in previous Brethren statements as ordinances, they should be viewed more like "church practices": "None of the three have symbolic significance *specifically* stated in the New Testament."

by triune immersion (Matt 28:19) and (2) the threefold communion service, consisting of the washing of the saints' feet (John 13:1-17), the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:20-22, 33-34; Jude 12), and the communion of the bread and cup (1 Cor 11:23-26).<sup>30</sup> The Grace Brethren remained committed to the Scriptures and took on a more Calvinistic bent by embracing the doctrine of eternal security or perseverance of the saints. Despite these commitments, they remained committed to Threefold Communion as their expression of the Lord's teaching.<sup>31</sup>

In the 1980s, a significant debate arose among the Grace Brethren on whether the practice of Threefold Communion was the only acceptable practice of Communion or if a church could practice the bread and cup apart from the other symbols.<sup>32</sup> After three years of discussions, the study committee concluded that a comprehensive Communion ordinance includes the love Feast, footwashing, and the bread and cup. The complete statement follows:

Therefore we advise that in FGBC churches the word "Communion" be reserved exclusively for the Threefold Communion service, since it is our understanding that when "the Communion of the bread and cup" is separated from the meal, it does not carry the same spiritual and symbolic impact as when it is joined together with the meal, and therefore, is not that which fulfills what Christ commanded to be perpetuated. If a church practices the Eucharist (the bread and cup) separately from the Threefold Communion service, it must clearly teach that this does not fulfill the obligation of the believer to do what Jesus instituted and what the New Testament church practiced as "Communion."<sup>33</sup>

Essentially, the Grace Brethren allowed the Eucharist to be taken apart from the love feast and footwashing for teaching purposes, but this concession should not replace Threefold Communion as the primary practice of the church. This position allows

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<sup>30</sup> Scoles, *Restoring the Household*, 253.

<sup>31</sup> Many saw Calvinistic theology as a shift from historic Brethrenism. George Ronk, "Antinomian Controversy in the Brethren Church," *Brethren Evangelist*, April 15, 1939, 27. However, McClain and the Grace Group saw Calvinism as taught in the Bible and consistent with Brethren tradition Alva J. McClain, "Eternal Security and the Brethren Church," *Brethren Evangelist*, April 15, 1939, 15.

<sup>32</sup> Plaster, *Finding Our Focus*, 159-63.

<sup>33</sup> *1985 Grace Brethren Annual* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1985), 26.

churches to practice the bread cup more frequently, but the expectation is for fellowship churches to remain committed to Threefold Communion.

### **Charis Commitment to Common Identity**

For the Grace Brethren, now known as the Charis Fellowship, another significant update occurred in 2015. In light of successful global missions throughout the movement's history, collections of Charis churches exist on five continents: Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and South America. There are several thousand Charis churches worldwide, with the vast majority in Central Africa. To recognize the international identity of the movement, representatives from all of these regions formed the Charis Alliance and, in partnership with one another, drafted the Charis Commitment to Common Identity. Each continent has its own national fellowship, but the national fellowships partner as an expression of a common heritage, doctrine, and mission.

The Charis Commitment to Common Identity is genuinely a global document, and each region adopted it as its statement of faith. As for the ordinances, there was both a recommitment and softening of the historic identity makers. The statement on Communion follows: "Communion testifies to our justification, sanctification, and glorification, which are accomplished through Jesus Christ. We therefore encourage the practice of these symbols: the bread and cup, the washing of feet and the sharing of a meal."<sup>34</sup> The new statement has several notable changes: (1) The statement emphasizes explanation. The previous confession stated the symbols without explanation, whereas the new statement explains the ordinances. (2) The phrase "Threefold Communion" is left out. All three elements of the typical Threefold Communion service remain, but it is unclear whether these signs must occur within one service. (3) The phrase "love feast" is changed to "sharing a meal." (4) The word "encourage" is included with the statement.

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<sup>34</sup> *The Charis Commitment to Common Identity* 3.5, Charis Alliance, 2015, [https://charisalliance.org/documents/ccci/Our\\_Commitment\\_to\\_Common\\_Identity\\_\(ENG\\_v2015.0\\_Letter\).pdf](https://charisalliance.org/documents/ccci/Our_Commitment_to_Common_Identity_(ENG_v2015.0_Letter).pdf).

The addition of “encourage” is likely the most monumental change and the years that follow will provide time to assess its impact.<sup>35</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Threefold Communion has been an essential practice since the beginning of the Brethren movement in 1708. By examining Alexander Mack’s convictions, Henry Holsinger’s reflections, and three confessional documents, it is clear that Threefold Communion has been an identity marker for more than three hundred years and has never been a divider among Brethren people. The historical practice provides a context to understand the biblical and theological foundation for Threefold Communion.

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<sup>35</sup> There are several ways to understand the impact of adding the word “encourage” to the statement on ordinances: (1) The global context: Since the identity document was created and ratified by a delegates from all over the world, some in Africa expressed questions as to how much food constitutes a “love feast.” There was also a concern about the availability of water for footwashing. In an effort to relieve the consciences of these brothers and sisters, the delegates used the word “encourage” so that they felt free to practice the ordinance with the elements they had available. (2) Optional practice: While the addition of the word “encourage” may have been approved for the sake of those without means to practice Threefold Communion, there is a legitimate question as to whether or not the three symbols constitute one ordinance and if a church should practice these symbols at all. Some will read the word “encourage” and understand it as an optional practice rather than a required one. (3) Selected practices: Another way this statement could apply is that Threefold Communion remains the comprehensive teaching of the fellowship, but one of these elements can be practiced apart from the other two at various times. This practice fits within the historic context discussed above that one element, typically the bread and cup, could be taken apart from the other two, so long as it is clear that the people understand it does not constitute the church’s full understanding of communion. It is for future delegations to navigate which of these issues needs clarity.

## CHAPTER 3

### COMMUNION AND PASSOVER: MULTIDIMENSIONAL SIGNS

The setting of Jesus’s Last Supper is full of debate and intrigue. Amidst a range of views, Andreas Köstenberger convincingly argues that Jesus did celebrate the Passover the night before his crucifixion.<sup>1</sup> This fact sets the stage for the ultimate fulfillment of this most significant Old Testament redemptive event. Jesus did not choose any ordinary meal in which to pick up bread and wine and declare, “Take eat/drink, do this in remembrance of me.” Indeed, his statements and actions had enormous implications and came during the Jewish people’s highest celebration of God’s deliverance and salvation. This chapter will show that Passover and Communion are multidimensional signs. Each institution symbolizes God’s act in the past, his ongoing work in the present, and his future work yet to come. In the following chapter, I show how Passover and Communion are acts of memorial, consecration, and anticipation.

#### **Passover as a Multidimensional Sign**

The connections between Passover and Communion are extensive, and one must not overlook similar theological themes. Ben Witherington asserts that a discussion on the Communion ordinance must begin with the “Jewish antecedents of this ritual.”<sup>2</sup> He goes on to state that “there is a relationship between Passover, the Last Supper, the Lord’s Supper, and indeed the Lamb’s Supper, and at least three of these meals all share

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Köstenberger, “Was the Last Supper a Passover Meal?,” in *The Lord’s Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 6-30.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Making a Meal of It: Rethinking the Theology of the Lord’s Supper* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), ix.

in common the idea that communion with God, perhaps, even some sort of union with God, is what the meal is all about.”<sup>3</sup> In light of Witherington’s assertions, this section will examine the multifaceted nature of the Passover ritual, revealing that Passover had memorial, immediate, and anticipatory elements to encourage the Jewish people to pursue faithfulness toward God in light of his saving work.

### **Passover as a Memorial**

God instituted Passover as a memorial so that the Jewish people would remember his redemptive work when he set them free from their bondage in Egypt. In Exodus 12:14, God said, “This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the meal provided parents an opportunity to teach their children of the mighty salvific acts of God that freed their ancestors (Exod 12:26). Douglas Stuart mentions that Passover was a “special and solemn religious celebration intended by its nonordinary character to focus attention on this memorable event every year.”<sup>5</sup> Subsequent celebrations would cause participants to go deep into their history, tracing their steps to their ancestors at the very first Passover meal.

Allen Ross explains that Passover was a worshipful ritual rather than simply a national holiday. The doxological overtones arise from the passage; in response to God’s word about the Passover, the people responded in praise: “And the people bowed their heads and worshiped” (Exod 12:27b). Ross mentions that specific guidelines existed for the meal to reenact this scene generation after generation. Without a “fixed liturgy” of words and actions, people would think that Passover was just about the food rather than

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<sup>3</sup> Witherington, *Making a Meal of It*, ix.

<sup>4</sup> לִזְכָּרוֹן (“memorial”) is used in Exod 30:16; Num 10:10; Josh 4:7; Zech 6:14. In these texts, the term is not used in connection with Passover but within the context of memorial and remembrance.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, New American Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 282.

God's work to save them.<sup>6</sup> This celebration was more than merely recalling historical events; it placed the nation in the context of divine deliverance. The nation perpetuated the festival because "all who would celebrate it in the years to come were to do it 'as if' they had been in Egypt at that formative time."<sup>7</sup> Memorials are essential because they remind later generations of their place in a larger developing story. Memorials help people make sense of their own story and the metanarrative they are experiencing.

Through Ross's summary, it is clear that the Passover should have a formative experience for every generation. As Israel remembered God's deliverance in the past, they could consider God's ongoing activity in their midst, anticipating a future and glorious ultimate exodus. Ross clarifies these concepts:

But this celebration also signified another step in the reversal of the curse in the garden: there the sinners were expelled from the presence of the Lord to serve the ground in order to survive where they served the world, to begin their journey back to enter God's rest; there the sinners could only look forward to death as a release from the curse, but here they escaped the judgment by the blood of the lamb and could look forward to life in another Eden.<sup>8</sup>

The foundation of Passover is a memorial celebration for the people to remember God's salvific work. As the feast developed over time, the memorial led the people toward present acts of consecration.

### **Passover as Consecration**

The Passover was an occasion of present consecration in light of God's ongoing work among his people. One example is the crossing of the Jordan River preceding the conquest of Jericho in Joshua 5:10. This Passover celebration consecrated the people and reaffirmed their commitment to the Lord. A generation removed from the

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<sup>6</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 160. This point is further proven by secular societies that celebrate holidays with religious origins or meaning (e.g., Christmas and Easter).

<sup>7</sup> Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 161.

<sup>8</sup> Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 161.

first exodus, these people applied God’s intention for the feast. Witherington explains, “The rehearsal of the story makes clear that it is not just a matter of the Jews’ remembering who they were, but indeed who they are and continue to be.”<sup>9</sup> A similar example is found in Ezra 6:19-22 when the people returned from exile and consecrated the new temple. Again, the people used this time for more than just a memorial of previous Passovers; they also saw it as an opportunity for dedication and celebration.

In 2 Chronicles 30, King Hezekiah instituted Passover as a culmination of covenant renewal and dedication. Unlike his father, Ahaz, King Hezekiah did what was right in the sight of the Lord (2 Chr 29:2) and cleansed the temple that his father had profaned. Hezekiah told the priests to consecrate themselves, and he led them in cleansing the temple (29:20-36). Immediately after the temple purification, Hezekiah sent letters throughout all Israel and Judah, informing them that they should come to Jerusalem to keep the Passover (30:1). King Hezekiah wanted to correct the path for the nation. His address to the people was about more than remembering the past; it was also about consecrating themselves as a spiritually renewed people.

Hezekiah began the letter by calling Israel to return to the Lord, who is the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel” (30:6). Israel’s history is the context for the command “to return.”<sup>10</sup> Then Hezekiah exhorted the people to learn from their ancestors’ negative examples (30:7-8).<sup>11</sup> Finally, he told them that they would find the Lord’s compassion if they returned to him: “For the Lord your God is gracious and merciful and will not turn his face from you, if you return to him” (30:9).

This feast resulted in a restored people and a joyous relationship with God that had not occurred since Solomon’s reign (30:26-27). The people remembered the Lord

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<sup>9</sup> Witherington, *Making a Meal of It*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> שׁוּבוּ = Qal, second person, plural, imperative.

<sup>11</sup> Verses 7 and 8 include “do not be” phrases, indicating that the memorial is partially meant to help the Jewish people avoid the sins of previous generations.

and celebrated the Passover feast as the ritual reminder of their covenant with Yahweh. This feast, however, had an immediate impact on their relationship with God. Celebrating the Passover restored the covenant community and identified the nation with all those who trust in the Lord for deliverance.

Centuries later, Passover celebrations became a means of connecting with the past and reaffirmation in the present. Witherington adds,

When we hear about the current celebrants' considering themselves part of the original exodus story (a sort of "we were there" feature) such that they were among those delivered from bondage in Egypt, we see how this meal serves to strengthen the ethnic bond with previous generations of Jews, including the foundational members of the group. Thus *anamnesis* is more than remembering; it is and becomes once again their own story, their own trial and triumph, which took place in the Exodus-Sinai events. As we shall see, something similar can be said about the Lord's Supper as well.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, the Passover acted as a memorial celebration which generated an immediate impact. However, Passover's past and present dimensions also led participants to anticipate their future hope.

### **Passover as Anticipation**

One can observe Passover's multidimensional nature as a feast of anticipation and fulfillment. When Israel celebrated Passover, they simultaneously remembered God's redemption, consecrated themselves in the present, and anticipated a future and greater exodus. Paul House notes,

The exodus symbolizes assurance of future deliverance in the Scriptures. Certainly Exodus 15:13-18 indicates that in the short term the exodus means God will help conquer the land promised to Abraham, an expectation repeated in Joshua 1:1-9 directly prior to the start of the conquest. Isaiah 51:9-11 has a longer-term goal in mind, which is that the first exodus prefigures Israel's "second exodus," or return from its post-587 B.C. Babylonian exile. Ezekiel envisions a similar second exodus return from exile, one in which Israel comes back to the land purged from the propensity to sin that caused them to lose it in the first place (Ezek 20:32-38). How can these prophets be so sure that one exodus implies that another will occur? Because Yahweh remains the God who delivers and Israel remains God's chosen,

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<sup>12</sup> Witherington, *Making a Meal of It*, 10.

beloved people. As long as Yahweh's nature remains intact the exodus principle does as well.<sup>13</sup>

These statements should lead readers to conclude that when later generations celebrated the Passover, they simultaneously remembered how God acted on behalf of their ancestors and looked forward to a new exodus and ultimate deliverance. The same celebration or ceremony held layers of meaning.

Future Israelite generations may have experienced a richer meaning of Passover than those eyewitnesses of the actual event. These descendants could appreciate God's previous acts in such a way that would inspire them to present faithfulness and anticipate a more excellent renewal. House states, "As a symbol of their belief in this God of past, present and future history, the Israelites will redeem their firstborn to demonstrate their faith in God who has elected Israel as Yahweh's firstborn (Exod 13:1-16)."<sup>14</sup> The Passover reminds Israel of their history, but the historical reminder inspires their faith for the present and their expectation of the future.

An awaited feast and celebration was a source of hope and anticipation for the nation. In Isaiah 25, the prophet looked forward to the day when God would make all things new in his kingdom and swallow death forever. Preceding that phrase, though, Isaiah 25:6-8 includes a vision of a future grand banquet:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well-refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

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<sup>13</sup> Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 106.

<sup>14</sup> House, *Old Testament Theology*, 103.

Regarding this text, Alec Motyer notes that Isaiah is thinking of the banquet described in Exodus 24:11.<sup>15</sup> Even if Passover is not the central theme here, it is reasonable to conclude that the Passover feast is merely an appetizer for a grander and more glorious banquet in the new heavens and new earth.

### **Passover Conclusion**

When Jesus gathered with his disciples the night before his crucifixion, he fulfilled his national history as the true Passover Lamb and replaced one ritual with another. Therefore, to truly understand the significance and magnitude of Christian Communion, it is necessary to reflect on the most significant Old Testament historical sign and redemption ritual. In this brief explanation, I have shown that Passover simultaneously connected past, present, and future dimensions for the Old Testament people of God. As I continue this biblical exploration, it is essential to remember that the New Testament understanding of Communion also holds past, present, and future dimensions.

### **Communion as the Multidimensional Sign**

In the previous section, I discussed the multidimensional nature of Passover in the Old Testament. Passover motivated the Israelites to remember the first exodus and God's work to free their ancestors. Passover, then, served as more than merely an act of remembrance but went further as an act of consecration. Covenant renewal required repentance which led the nation to revive the Passover.<sup>16</sup> Remembrance and consecration in the present moved the people to anticipate a new and more excellent feast with the

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<sup>15</sup> Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 209.

<sup>16</sup> Part of Josiah's reforms and covenant renewal led to celebrating Passover, which was not a regular practice for the nation. As 2 Kgs 23:21-22 reads, "And the king commanded all the people, 'Keep the Passover to the Lord your God, as it is written in the Book of the Covenant.' For no such Passover had been kept since the days of the judges who judged Israel, or during all the days of the kings of Israel or of the kings of Judah."

Lord in a new and consummated kingdom. Passover was a multidimensional ritual for the people to remember God's saving acts, consecrate covenant renewal, and anticipate the fulfillment of God's promises.

The Lord's Supper, or Communion, replaces Passover as the most significant ritual for God's people.<sup>17</sup> Like Passover, Communion is a multidimensional sign with various facets of significance. David Dockery captures the complexity of the Lord's Supper, "The celebration of the Supper directs our attention back to the work of Christ on the cross and also encourages a forward look to the second coming of Christ. In addition, it provides time for believers to examine their relationship with others while experiencing communion with the exalted Christ."<sup>18</sup> This section will summarize the past, present, and future elements of Communion.<sup>19</sup>

### **Communion as Memorial**

Jesus instituted Communion so that his followers would remember his substitutionary death on the cross. Luke records Jesus's memorializing intention of Communion in the institution of the Supper, "And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me'" (Luke 22:19). Likewise, Paul uses this exact phrase twice in 1 Corinthians 11:24-25 and associates the ritual of the Lord's Supper with a

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<sup>17</sup> James Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 34. Hamilton captures the connection between Passover and Communion: "Just as the Passover meal was a regular celebration of God's glory in salvation through judgment, so the Lord's Supper replaces the Passover as the commemoration of God's deliverance of his people through the judgment of their enemies." G. K. Beale sees a similar continuity as well: "Israel's Passover meal was inextricably bound to the event of the Passover and reminded Israel of its exodus redemption, which pointed to the new creation. The equivalent NT meal, the Lord's Supper, is the antitypical correspondence, fulfilling the type of Israel's meal. Very closely connected to this Passover meal typology is Christ as the Passover lamb, who fulfills that to which Israel's Passover lamb pointed." G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 818. Continuity and discontinuity exist in the relationship between Passover and Communion. This section assumes readers recognize that Communion replaces the Passover celebration and yet key theological themes remain.

<sup>18</sup> David Dockery, foreword to Schreiner and Crawford, *The Lord's Supper*, xv.

<sup>19</sup> The next chapter will show how the practice of Threefold Communion is the best way to appreciate these facets.

particular act of remembering. Communion as a memorial reminds Christians of the historicity of Jesus's death and leads to the proclamation of the truth.

Memorials matter because they serve as a place to tell a story. Israel's history was full of acts meant to remind the people of God's faithfulness and the nation's history. The Passover festival was the quintessential ritual to tell of the most significant event in their history. The Passover ritual became the ultimate object lesson for those who did not experience it. Brian Vickers states, "The visual symbols of Passover are joined with teaching that interprets the symbols. Fathers tell their children, 'I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.'"<sup>20</sup>

Further, Communion provides the same opportunity for new covenant believers to remember God's faithfulness to his people. An act of remembrance or memorial is beneficial as it points back to the historical reality of that given event. Communion is not a mythic meal to tell fabricated stories; instead, it is a meaningful ritual rooted in history to remind participants of actual events.

Memorializing acts are not merely for the sake of personal remembrance; they are also the grounds for heralding news in such a way that leads to a response. Paul writes, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). The bread and cup provide a physical teaching tool to proclaim the death of Christ. The historical acts only matter so long as those hearing about them respond appropriately. The gospel's good news is not an event to which one can be indifferent but must respond accordingly. Responding to truth is vital for any significant historical event, but specifically, a biblically shaped memory should not simply help a participant recall dates, times, and places. Instead, biblical remembering

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<sup>20</sup> Brian Vickers, "The Lord's Supper: Celebrating Past and Future in the Present," in Schreiner and Crawford, *The Lord's Supper*, 320.

should transform participants as they become part of the story.<sup>21</sup> As believers remember and proclaim the gospel, they change in the present.

### **Communion as Consecration**

Understanding Communion as a memorial causes participants to remember and proclaim the historical fact that Jesus's died on the cross for sinners. Like Passover that preceded it, Communion serves as a covenant renewal and act of consecration. As Ross states, "the memorial aspect of it [Communion] should be continually life changing."<sup>22</sup> The best memories inspire present change and restoration. Understanding the connection between remembrance and renewal is essential so that Christians comprehend the present benefit of the Lord's Supper.<sup>23</sup> Transformation takes place in two ways: First, believers are transformed through self-examination, repentance, and renewed faith. Second, the church renews its commitment to the body of Christ through reconciliation and humility before spiritual brothers and sisters.

The Bible commands believers to examine themselves as part of the Communion ordinance in 1 Corinthians 11. While warning Christians from participating in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner, Paul exhorts his readers, "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor 11:28-29). This passage is difficult to understand, but Gordon Fee clarifies Paul's intent,

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<sup>21</sup> Vickers, "The Lord's Supper," 321. Ross writes, "Now, if the ritual of Holy Communion is properly and fully explained and the ritual is observed with holiness and piety, the gospel will be proclaimed in the most effective way—its message of the remission of sins dramatized in the ritual of Communion. Thus, this is a uniquely Christian ritual. Other religions have festivals, prayers, holy books, and hymns, but Holy Communion proclaims that in Christ there is forgiveness of sin, peace with God, and eternal life." Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 401. Of course, these symbols are the complements to Word-based proclamation. The acts themselves do not preach Christ crucified but provide the opportunity and illustration for that proclamation.

<sup>22</sup> Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 399.

<sup>23</sup> When discussing the present benefit of the Lord's Supper, I want to avoid both sacramentalism, which believes the Lord's Supper is a "means of grace" where one is actually eating/absorbing grace through the elements, and a type of memorialism that seems to make Communion merely optional with no clear spiritual benefit.

“This is not a call for deep personal introspection to determine whether one is worthy of the Table. Rather, it stands in contrast to the ‘divine examination’ to which unworthy participation will lead.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, self-examination is an integral part of the Communion celebration and should not prevent participation.

Paul’s concern for believers to partake of Communion in a worthy manner shows that Communion is a sacred symbol and flippant participation could lead to judgment. As believers gather for the Lord’s Supper time and again, they recall the sufficiency of Christ’s death for their ongoing sin in the present, not just sin before they trusted in Christ. These moments of examination provide Christians an opportunity to experience the Lord’s faithfulness and justice in response to repentance (1 John 1:9). Ongoing self-examination within the Communion service renews the vertical relationship between the believer and the Lord.

Another aspect of self-examination in Communion is the horizontal relationship between believers.<sup>25</sup> The Lord’s Supper has a unifying nature as the covenant celebration draws believers to the Lord and one another. Paul writes of the corporate nature of Communion in 1 Corinthians 10:17: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of one bread.” The corporate nature of the Lord’s Supper may be one of the more underappreciated features of the ordinance. Much is made out of the individual responsibility to repent unconfessed sin, but the church must also emphasize the relational motifs.

Paul addresses the “divisions” and “factions” within the church. The command, then to “Let a person examine himself” (1 Cor 11:28), counters the disunity

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<sup>24</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 561.

<sup>25</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 406-407. Allison maintains that the self-examination is not meant to discern unconfessed sin but is directed at discerning divisions within the body of Christ.

within the body of Christ. Gregg Allison writes of how Communion reveals and inspires unity within the church, “Consequently, the observance of the Lord’s Supper is to be preceded by self-examination to ensure that those who intend to participate do so in a worthy manner; that is, with love and out of deference to others and without hint of divisiveness.”<sup>26</sup> The unifying nature of the Lord’s Supper causes believers to examine individual sin before God and any sin committed against a brother or sister in Christ.

Spiritual consecration through communion should lead to reconciliation and humility within the body of Christ. Jesus is the faithful servant who did not come to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45), and his followers walk in his example and serve others in humility. Vickers captures how Communion highlights the outward focus of the Christian life: “The Supper is *the* ultimate symbolic act of unity in the Church, as the body of Christ gathers around symbols of the one Lord who died for all an in whom all are united.”<sup>27</sup> While all sin is first against God, much sin is also against another individual. Therefore, protecting the church’s unity should be a priority for every church member. Corporate sins, then, such as slander, selfish promotion, and considering other church members as inferior would make “one unworthy to take the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>28</sup> Communion fosters the church’s unity which is central to covenant renewal.

### **Communion as Anticipation**

The multidimensional nature of Communion culminates with a focus on the future and anticipation of kingdom renewal. The Synoptic Gospels all emphasize the future aspects of the kingdom of God associated with the Lord’s Supper.<sup>29</sup> Each Gospel

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<sup>26</sup> Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 395.

<sup>27</sup> Vickers, “The Lord’s Supper,” 328.

<sup>28</sup> Vickers, “The Lord’s Supper,” 329.

<sup>29</sup> Matt 26:29: “I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” Mark 14:25: “Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” Luke 22:16-18: “‘For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given

writer records Jesus saying that he will not partake of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom's fulfillment. As Jesus institutes the Supper and dies on the cross, he only inaugurates the kingdom and still looks to its completion. Communion is a sign of remembrance, but it is also an eschatological sign because, as D. A. Carson summarizes, "The Lord's Supper looks forward to deliverance and life in a consummated kingdom."<sup>30</sup>

Paul brings out the future orientation to the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:26, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." Therefore, every time a church participates in Communion, believers confess a collective hope in Jesus' return. The church confesses her eschatological existence, and this meal reminds them that God will be faithful to his promises.<sup>31</sup>

The already and not yet nature of the kingdom is central to understanding the new covenant sign.<sup>32</sup> In a sense, every time believers gather for Communion, they ask the Father, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). The expectant hope of kingdom renewal is a natural part of being the people of God. Allison suggests that Jesus indicates to his disciples that he would be physically absent from them. However, he also expected to celebrate a messianic banquet with them in the future, "Thus, a strong eschatological atmosphere pervaded the Last Supper, which was also the culmination of the prophetic hope of the people of God."<sup>33</sup>

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thanks he said, 'Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.'

<sup>30</sup> D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 539

<sup>31</sup> Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 557.

<sup>32</sup> As Thomas Schreiner states, "The Lord's Supper also communicates the already-not yet character of Paul's theology. The new covenant has arrived, but it is not yet completely fulfilled. It will reach its consummation when the Lord returns, when the kingdom is consummated." Thomas Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 734. Cf. Beale, who says, "Hence, the Lord's Supper contains in itself a beginning form of the last judgment, which will be consummated at the end of time." Beale, *New Testament Theology*, 818.

<sup>33</sup> Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 387.

## **Communion Conclusion**

Like its Passover predecessor, Communion is a multidimensional sign meant to cause God's people to remember his saving acts, consecrate themselves for greater faithfulness, and anticipate the future kingdom. Vickers provides a masterful summary that captures the multidimensional nature of the ongoing new covenant ritual:

The gospel that proclaims Jesus' death also proclaims His resurrection, making the Supper not a memorial service in remembrance of the dead, but a remembrance of the dead and buried Jesus who rose from the grave and who is coming again. The constant interaction of the past, present, and future is nowhere more evident than in the Lord's Supper. The death and resurrection of Christ guarantees the future and transforms the present as believers are reminded through the interpreted symbols that their lives are not just an endless loop of days; the One who gave Himself for His people abides with them and is coming again for them.<sup>34</sup>

Since Communion is a rich symbol with various themes, its application in the church should reflect its beautiful complexity.

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<sup>34</sup> Vickers, "The Lord's Supper," 338.

## CHAPTER 4

### THREEFOLD COMMUNION APPLICATION

The past, present, and future themes of Communion should lead to a practical application where the mode reflects the doctrine.<sup>1</sup> Most churches take the bread and cup with some measure of consistency within the life and ministry of their church. The bread and cup symbolize the blood and body of Christ on the cross and is the practice in most congregations. However, what if the best way to portray the comprehensive nature of Communion is to include more than just one symbol? In this chapter, I propose that Threefold Communion is a precise and better application of the past, present, and future realities of a relationship with Jesus. Threefold Communion is truly a comprehensive ordinance for the whole Christian life. In Threefold Communion, believers celebrate their justification and sanctification while anticipating their glorification. This section will show the biblical precedent, theological symbolism, and church application for the love feast, footwashing, and bread and cup.<sup>2</sup>

#### **The Love Feast**

The love feast is the natural starting place because this meal was the context for the church gathering. When Jesus assembled with his disciples on the night before his crucifixion, he ate with them. It is best to conclude that he celebrated the Passover with

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<sup>1</sup> David R. Plaster, *Ordinances: What Are They?* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1985), 47.

<sup>2</sup> I begin with the love feast, then cover footwashing, and close with the bread and cup as a suggested order of the service. I will show that the love feast is the appropriate context of the meal, footwashing took place during the meal, and the bread and cup is the culmination of the Threefold Communion service.

them, but whether or not the meal was a Passover is irrelevant to the Christian love feast.<sup>3</sup> Since Jesus is the true Passover Lamb, the early church did not see the Passover as a sign of perpetuation (1 Cor 5:7). Even though the Passover was no longer a necessary Christian celebration, local churches met for meals and special celebrations.<sup>4</sup> Herman Bavinck admits that Jesus's last supper set a precedent for the early church love feast, "[T]he place and time at which the Supper was instituted and celebrated in ancient times clearly shows that it is a real meal. Jesus, after all, instituted the Supper on an occasion when he along with his disciples reclined at the Passover table."<sup>5</sup> The love feast has biblical precedent and is the theological symbol of glorification.

### **Biblical Precedence for the Love Feast**

The love feast is the context for the gathered church to take the Eucharist in the Bible. For some, the love feast and the Lord's Supper refer to the same event since no biblical passage separates them.<sup>6</sup> Gregg Allison understands the love feast as a broader

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<sup>3</sup> The discussion of Passover above reveals my convictions that Jesus was in fact celebrating the Passover. Nevertheless, one may disagree, and the Passover and Communion themes remain rich and meaningful.

<sup>4</sup> Theodore G. Tappert, *The Lord's Supper: Past and Present Practices* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961), 15-20. Tappert includes a helpful summary of the history of the love feast, including when it was divorced from the bread and cup, and notes how the Moravians and the Brethren revived the practice. Space does not allow for an extensive history of love feast. See C. F. Yoder, *God's Means of Grace: A Discussion of the Various Helps Divinely Given as Aids to Christian Character, and a Plea for Fidelity to Their Scriptural Form and Purpose* (1908; repr., Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1979), 371-87. Yoder provides an excellent summary of primary and secondary sources on the history of the love feast.

<sup>5</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *The Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 564.

<sup>6</sup> Bradley Bryon Blue, "Love Feast," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, IVP Bible Dictionary Series (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993), 578. Cf. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 532. Fee agrees that the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper in the context of a meal. See also Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, *Ante-Nicene Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959). Schaff provides a help explanation of Communion in the contest of the love feast as well: "At first the communion was joined with a love feast, and was then celebrated in the evening, in memory of the last supper of Jesus with his disciples. But so early as the beginning of the second century these two exercises were separated, and the communion was placed in the morning, the love feast in the evening, except days of observance. Tertullian gives a detailed description of the Agape in refutation of the shameless calumnies of the heathens (Apol c. 39). But the growth of the churches and the rise of manifold abuses led to the gradual disuse, and in the fourth century even to the formal prohibition of the Agape, which belonged in fact only to the childhood and first love of the church. It was a family feast, where rich and poor, master and slave met on the same footing, partaking

practice in the early church, “In the church of Corinth, as in others of the earliest churches (e.g., Jude 12), the Lord’s Supper was celebrated as part of an agape, or love, feast.”<sup>7</sup> Some may not understand the love feast as a necessary aspect of the communion ordinance. Still, those who include the practice are not doing so without a biblical example.

First Corinthians 11:17-34 is the most explicit passage that sees the Eucharist in the context of a full meal or feast. The meal setting is evident in verses 20 and 21, “When you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk.” Paul describes more than just a piece of bread and a sip of wine, but he addresses a larger meal that provides the context for the church gathering.

In this passage, Paul corrects the abuse of Communion. Ben Witherington sees two main issues that Paul responds to in 1 Corinthians:

(1) he wants to make clear that Christians should not attend feasts or drinking parties in pagan temples at all. The dramatic way he puts it is: ‘you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons’ (10:21); (2) Paul does not want his converts to hold their fellowship meals (called *agapais*, or “love-feasts,” in Jude 12) according to the rules of Greco-Roman dining, perhaps especially because the Lord’s Supper was part of this larger fellowship meal and occasion.<sup>8</sup>

The larger meal was an opportunity to unify this multiethnic and economically diverse congregation in their love for one another. However, the church split into various

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of a simple meal, hearing reports from distant congregations, contributing to the necessities of suffering brethren, and encouraging each other in their daily duties and trials. Augstin describes his mother Monica as going to these feasts with a basket full of provisions and distributing them” (239-40). Finally, see Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries* (Austin: Sweet, 1971), 129-36. Ferguson provides comments on the love feast from other church fathers (e.g., Ignatius, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus).

In many Brethren theological texts, the Lord’s Supper refers exclusively to the love feast and the Eucharist refers to the bread and cup. However, I use Lord’s Supper and Communion interchangeably and refer to the love feast as one portion of the broader ordinance.

<sup>7</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 392. Similar to 1 Corinthians 11, Jude 12 is another example of abuse of the love feast. Here, false teachers are eating alongside the church.

<sup>8</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Making a Meal of It: Rethinking the Theology of the Lord’s Supper* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2007), 38.

exclusive booths instead of celebrating a family meal where everyone was welcome. Paul continues his rebuke in verse 22, “What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.” The Corinthians abused this high celebration in the church for their destructive purposes. Fee explains that their problem was not in the gathering itself but their relational division instead of unity in Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Paul’s rebuke of the Corinthian’s use of a meal associated with the Eucharist may be a reason to forsake the practice altogether; however, a rejection of the love feast is shortsighted. The abuse of the love feast is not the only practice that Paul rebukes in 1 Corinthians. He calls out sexual immorality, but in no way suggests sexual abstinence in marriage (6:12-7:16).<sup>10</sup> Paul warns of the abuse of spiritual gifts, but in no way suggests believers should not exercise their gift for the building up of the church in love (12:1-13:13). Paul critiques the unhelpful and disorderly use of prophecy and tongues in the corporate worship service, but in no way suggests an abatement of the corporate worship service (14:1-40). These examples show that Paul’s correction of the abuses of the love feast and the Eucharist should not lead believers to throw out the practice.

### **Theological Symbolism of the Love Feast**

The biblical precedent and early church practice of the love feast are unquestionable. However, a critical question is whether or not Jesus intends for the love feast to continue throughout every age and every congregation. Generally, it is a wise disposition to replicate a biblical example. If the earliest Christians included the love

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<sup>9</sup> Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 536.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, Paul responds to this very issue as it is possible that some Corinthian believers were even avoiding sexual relations in marriage: “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.’ But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband” (1 Cor 7:1-3).

feast as part of their communion services, then practicing the love feast requires less defense than not practicing it. Nevertheless, a biblical practice holds greater significance if it holds theological symbolism.<sup>11</sup> If the love feast, as David Plaster writes, has “intended and specific symbolic significance,” then the love feast should remain a part of the communion ordinance.<sup>12</sup> The theological symbolism of the love feast is associated with glorification.<sup>13</sup>

**The love feast and glorification.** Herman Hoyt sees the love feast as a symbol of the future ministry of Christ characterized with his Bride at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:7-9; Eph 5:25-33).<sup>14</sup> The love feast expresses the church’s unity, but it also foreshadows a day of ultimate unity and personal glorification.<sup>15</sup> Plaster notes how Jesus used his final meal with his disciples to picture a future meal (Luke 22:15-16, 17-18, 29-30; Matt 26:29; Mark 14:25).<sup>16</sup> All of these texts emphasize a forward-looking completion of the kingdom of God. Jesus will one day restore all things, and these meals serve as a consistent reminder of Jesus’s plan to make all things new. Plaster further

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<sup>11</sup> Plaster makes a helpful contribution here: “The mode or form of an ordinance must also reflect as accurately as possible that which is being symbolized. John Calvin stated, ‘It is a general rule in all sacraments that the signs which we see must have some correspondence with the spiritual thing which is figured.’ It has already been pointed out that the physical practice has no reality or intrinsic worth apart from the spiritual reality to which it points. Thus, the mode or form should reflect the spiritual reality. The doctrine or spiritual reality being symbolized has a great deal to say about the form used in an ordinance.” Plaster, *Ordinances*, 47.

<sup>12</sup> Plaster, *Ordinances*, 61.

<sup>13</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 90-91. Allison provides consistent definitions: “Glorification. The final mighty act of God in salvation. Occurring at Christ’s return, glorification is both (1) the reembodiment of believers who have died and exist without their bodies in heaven, and (2) the instantaneous change in the bodies of believers on earth. In the first case, their bodies are raised from the dead and transformed; in the second case, their current bodies are immediately transformed. In both cases, the glorified bodies are imperishable (never to wear out or become sick), glorious (beautiful, perhaps radiant), powerful (not superhuman but full strength), and spiritual (dominated by God’s Spirit).”

<sup>14</sup> Herman A. Hoyt, *This Do in Remembrance of Me* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1947), 91-92.

<sup>15</sup> Hoyt, *This Do in Remembrance of Me*, 106.

<sup>16</sup> Plaster, *Ordinances*, 61.

clarifies, “These references interwoven into the teaching that night gave the entire meal a special significance.”<sup>17</sup>

The symbolism becomes even richer when one considers Revelation 19:9 and the marriage supper of the Lamb. During a whole meal, Jesus tells his disciples that their earthly banquets are but appetizers for the great feast in the kingdom.<sup>18</sup> Allison notes that one of the names for Communion is “the Lord’s Supper” because Jesus instituted this ongoing rite at his Last Supper with the disciples, and this Supper anticipates the eschatological meal of the marriage supper of the Lamb.<sup>19</sup> These passages provide imagery of a wedding feast. G. K. Beale notes the wedding banquet metaphor in Revelation 19:9, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb,” is a continuation of verses 7 and 8, where the church is a Bride.<sup>20</sup> James Hamilton agrees and suggests that as believers meditate on the wedding day that awaits, it grows anticipation for the Bridegroom.<sup>21</sup>

Communion has a future orientation and dynamic, which is indisputable. Yes, the bread and cup proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes (1 Cor 11:26), but Paul still associates the bread and cup with the death of Christ. On the other hand, the love feast provides a more excellent picture for local churches to imagine the great marriage supper of the Lamb where they will be one with one another, one with Christ, and wholly made new.

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<sup>17</sup> Plaster, *Ordinances*, 61.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan T. Pennington, “The Last Supper in the Fourfold Witness of the Gospels,” In *The Lord’s Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 56-57.

<sup>19</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *The Church: An Introduction*, Short Studies in Systematic Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway 2021), 118. Allison is not arguing for Threefold Communion; nevertheless, he notes the eschatological anticipation of the marriage supper of the Lamb.

<sup>20</sup> G. K. Beale, *Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 945.

<sup>21</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches*, Preaching the Word, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 352.

## Church Application of the Love Feast

Recovering the love feast may seem like an unnecessary and inconvenient task. However, a renaissance of the love feast could make Communion an even more special and meaningful gathering in church life.<sup>22</sup> Witherington notes extensively:

Should we have the Lord's Supper in the context of a larger meal? Clearly this is how the earliest Christians did this, thus making it part of Christian hospitality in general. We have certainly lost a good deal of that welcoming feature of the meal. The Brethren do indeed celebrate the Lord's Supper in the context of the meal, but they do it in the fellowship hall, which means it tends to be separate from the main part of the worship. Perhaps the whole service could be held in the fellowship hall and the Lord's Supper be served in the context of a meal. This would take longer, but it would also add back the element of *koinonia* and fellowship and sharing all things in common that originally characterized the meal.<sup>23</sup>

Witherington suggests a beautiful application that those connected to the Brethren church have practiced for more than three hundred years. While there will be objections to the biblical and theological prescription of the love feast, the following are two reasons why its application is beneficial for the church.

First, the Bible never separates the bread and cup from the meal.<sup>24</sup> This meal is not an ordinary gathering but a high celebration in church life and provides an alternative context for believers to gather outside of the corporate worship service. Since Communion is meant only for baptized believers, an exclusive and separate gathering provides a better context.<sup>25</sup> Paul's correction of the Corinthian abuses should not lead believers to dismiss the practice altogether but rather renew the exercise in a God-honoring fashion.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 408.

<sup>23</sup> Witherington, *Making a Meal of It*, 131.

<sup>24</sup> Hoyt, *This Do in Remembrance of Me*, 89.

<sup>25</sup> Later, I will discuss how the love feast provides a better and more appropriate context for uniting the church in love for one another through the power and work of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>26</sup> Hoyt, *This Do in Remembrance of Me*, 94.

Second, the love feast is a better symbol of the heavenly banquet. A meal outside of the broader worship service is a better picture of the feast believers will enjoy with the Lord than merely taking the bread and cup after a worship service.<sup>27</sup> Recovering the love feast from its abuses can restore a beautiful image of heavenly reward and celebration. The feast the church can enjoy now is a corrective to what Paul reprimanded the Corinthians for abusing. Instead of a division between rich and poor, the church can gather in genuine love for one another. True glorification in the kingdom is where people from every tribe, language, and tongue gather in perfect unity to show that this is indeed the Lord's table.

### **Footwashing**

There is no doubt that footwashing is the aspect of Threefold Communion most lost on contemporary Christians. The cultural value of footwashing is rooted in a Graeco-Roman hospitality culture,<sup>28</sup> so the practice seems cultural and strange for individualistic modern Christians. However, the contemporary application of footwashing is realistic in light of the biblical evidence and theological significance that Jesus gives the symbol.

### **Biblical Precedence for Footwashing**

The biblical rationale for footwashing centers on one key text in John's Gospel. Chapters 13-17 are John's take of Jesus's last evening with his disciples that

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<sup>27</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 121-22. Köstenberger and O'Brien discuss how both Jews and Gentiles will enjoy the messianic banquet. Luke-Acts makes the unity of Jew and Gentile extremely clear. Including the love feast with Communion again provides a greater context for the kind of unity in the church which the Bible prescribes in light of the gospel of Jesus.

<sup>28</sup> John Christopher Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community* (Worcester, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 46. Thomas makes a connection between footwashing and a banquet, "By far the best documented and most frequent accounts of footwashing are to be found in contexts where the washing precedes a meal or banquet" (47).

harmonizes with the Synoptic accounts.<sup>29</sup> However, there are vital differences in John's telling of the event. First, John has a noteworthy inclusion, and second, he has a notable exclusion. He includes footwashing and excludes the bread and cup.

First, John includes the footwashing episode. John writes that during the Supper, Jesus rose, set aside his outer garments, wrapped a towel around him, and proceeded to wash his disciple's feet (13:4-5). Jesus's actions were genuinely remarkable and counter-cultural for that day.<sup>30</sup> The counter-cultural element then led to a lengthy exchange with Peter, who initially refused to allow Jesus to wash his feet (13:7-8). However, Jesus challenged him by saying, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me" (13:8). Again, Peter objected and claimed his head and his hands required cleansing. Finally, Jesus clarified, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash except for his feet" (13:10).

If John provided only the description of Jesus washing feet, then it may be easy to move on and conclude that Jesus's actions are merely profound acts of humility. However, Jesus does not end this section with just an example. Instead, he explains his actions and connects a theological reality to the symbol.<sup>31</sup> After Jesus washed their feet and resumed his place, he directed them to follow his example, "If I then, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do just as I have done for you" (13:14-15). The

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<sup>29</sup> Pennington, "The Last Supper in the Fourfold Witness," 35. Pennington concludes rightly that this meal is the same meal recorded in the Synoptics.

<sup>30</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 462. Carson provides helpful background on this episode, "Doubtless the disciples would have been happy to wash his feet; they could not conceive of washing one another's feet, since this was a task normally reserved for the lowliest of menial servants."

<sup>31</sup> J. Matthew Pinson, *The Washing of the Saints' Feet*, (Randall House: Nashville, 2006), 34.

biblical rationale for perpetuating footwashing rests in Jesus's command associated with his actions.<sup>32</sup>

The second noteworthy aspect of John's Gospel is what he does not include. There is no mention of the bread and cup in John outside of an allusion to it in John 6:53-55.<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Pennington suggests that by the time John wrote his Gospel, the Eucharist was already so widespread as a church practice that it did not require a comment.<sup>34</sup> Pennington's point may be correct because John was present at that Last Supper and was undoubtedly aware of the practice. However, it is impossible to know precisely why John would leave out the bread and cup. In any case, John emphasizes footwashing, which requires more explanation. John's inclusion of footwashing and his omission of the bread and cup should cause Christians to consider if both symbols should be part of a comprehensive communion ordinance. Moving from the biblical text to theological symbolism, Christians see the significance of footwashing.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Plaster, *Ordinances*, 78. For Plaster there are two marks of an ordinance: "The first distinguishing mark of an ordinance is found in the fact that it is a physical act ceremonial in nature." (33). The second, is the spiritual reality that the physical act is meant to portray. (43-50) Plaster discusses the grammar of this command as well; "In the original Greek found there the verb for 'ought' followed by an infinitive emphasizes the moral obligation, the necessity of duty, the binding legal debt of that which is commanded. The strength of this command is found in other passages such as 1 John 4:11, Ephesians 5:28, and Matthew 18:28. The sense of obligation and the clear command are evident in each case. The present tenses found in the original Greek for both the imperative and the infinitive stress the need to continue and perpetuate the act which Jesus has just completed."

<sup>33</sup> Carson, *John*, 297. Even Carson expresses caution and precision when considering an allusion to the Eucharist. His warnings do not forbid thinking of the bread and cup, but he suggests, "But such allusions as exist prompt the thoughtful reader to look behind the eucharist, to that to which the eucharist itself points."

<sup>34</sup> Pennington, "The Last Supper in the Fourfold Witness," 37. In explaining why John may leave the bread and cup out Pennington states, "This may be simply another example of the common phenomenon where the most obvious thing about the meal—the bread and cup—was so well known in Christian tradition by John's time that it was not stated explicitly."

<sup>35</sup> Space does not allow for an extended discussion on 1 Timothy 5:9-10 which is the only reference to footwashing outside of John's Gospel. See Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community*, 136. Thomas notes that Paul's language implies that the footwashing performed by the widow was a Christian rite and not simply a sign of hospitality. He continues to see a link between 1 Timothy 5 and John 13: "If this practice was a religious act of the community, it is likely that it was based upon knowledge of the tradition upon which John 13 is based."

## Theological Symbolism of Footwashing

The biblical precedent for footwashing leads to understanding the theological symbolism Jesus bestows on the act. Plaster poses questions that every interpreter must answer, “Was Jesus using the act of footwashing, recorded in John 13:1-17, to point to a spiritual truth? Did the washing of feet symbolize something?”<sup>36</sup> Most people will answer these questions affirmatively, yet disagreement remains on precisely what Jesus symbolizes and whether that act remains necessary today. However, since Jesus combines a command with a physical act that pictures a spiritual reality, footwashing should remain part of the communion ordinance. Threefold Communion seeks to apply the ordinance’s past, present, and future realities. Footwashing then is the symbol of sanctification.<sup>37</sup> This act helps believers consider the present work of Christ in their lives and unites the church.<sup>38</sup>

**Footwashing and sanctification.** Examining Peter’s objections to Jesus washing his feet reveals the connection of footwashing to sanctification. The first protest is in verses 6 and 7. Jesus responds, “What I am doing you do not understand, but afterward you will understand” (13:7). What is Jesus referring to with this question? Plaster sees Jesus’s reference to the future outpouring of the Spirit as he looks forward to the discourse following these actions, “In view of Jesus’ statements in John 14:26 and 16:23, the future time of understanding must be associated with the illumination of the Helper, the Spirit of truth, after His coming from the Father.”<sup>39</sup> The connection between the sign of footwashing and the arrival of the Spirit makes sense in light of Jesus’s

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<sup>36</sup> Plaster, *Ordinances*, 57.

<sup>37</sup> Hoyt, *This Do in Remembrance of Me*, 106. Hoyt explicitly states the theological symbolism: “In feetwashing we have seen the symbol of sanctification, and how Christ during His present ministry keeps on cleansing the believer from his defilement by the washing of water in the Word.”

<sup>38</sup> A future section will deal with the Holy Spirit’s unique role to transform and unite the church through communion. This section will address the subject in the context of the past, present, and future aspects of Threefold Communion.

<sup>39</sup> Plaster, *Ordinances*, 57.

extended comments about the Spirit.<sup>40</sup> Jesus goes on in this same evening to deliver the Upper Room Discourse, and the Holy Spirit is a primary subject as Jesus prepares his disciples for his impending death. Jesus uses footwashing to foreshadow the arrival of the Holy Spirit, who is the agent of sanctification.

Peter's second and third objections also reveal that Jesus is using footwashing to symbolize sanctification. In verse 8, Peter's second objection is that he refuses to allow Jesus to wash his feet. However, Jesus responds,

If I do not wash you, you have no share with me" (13:8). Peter's third objection is in verses 9-11 as he responds again to Jesus by saying not just his feet, but his hands and head must be clean as well. Jesus responds, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not everyone of you. (John 13:10)

Jesus's answer reveals that something other than the washing of salvation must be in view.<sup>41</sup> Plaster suggests, "Thus he whose inmost nature has been renovated does not need radical renewal, but only to be cleansed from the clinging filth of sin into which he may fall through intercourse with the unrenewed world. This repeated cleansing of defilement

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<sup>40</sup> It is important to see John 13:1-20 connected with Jesus's discourse through John 17. Even if the discourse itself does not begin until 13:31, the footwashing event took place at the same time. Carson, *John*, 476-77.

<sup>41</sup> Carson disagrees: "The act of footwashing is a symbol of this complete washing, and not some additional cleansing." Carson, *John*, 464. Witherington says that the "footwashing ceremony points to Jesus' death on the cross. Jesus is making graphic through this symbolic act the lengths he will go as a servant to cleans his disciples from sin." Witherington, *Making a Meal of It*, 83. If that is the case, then why does Jesus respond to Peter with "The one who has bathed only needs his feet washed?" But if Pennington is correct that John does not deal with the bread and cup because the symbols would have been used extensively without need of comment, one must conclude that baptism would have been a common symbol as well and its significance as the symbol of cleansing, regeneration, and renewal. Pennington, "The Last Supper in the Fourfold Witness," 37-38. John Calvin sees both a washing of regeneration and a washing that takes away our desire for sin; one could call it sanctification: "But before proceeding farther, we must understand what is the meaning of the word *wash*. Some refer it to the free pardon of sins; others, to newness of life; while a third class extends it to both, and this last view I cheerfully admit. For Christ *washes* us when he removes the guilt of our sins by his atoning sacrifice, that they may not come into judgment before God; and, on the other hand, he *washes* us when he takes away, by his Spirit, the wicked and sinful desires of the flesh. But as it will shortly afterwards be evident from what follows, that he speaks of the grace of regeneration, I do not absolutely maintain the opinion he included here the *washing* of pardon." John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. 2, trans. William Pringle, *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 58.

is the present work of Christ using the water of the Word (Eph 5:25-27). The spiritual reality of sanctification is symbolized in the washing of feet.”<sup>42</sup>

The washing Jesus refers to does not necessitate the washing of salvation. The washing of salvation is undoubtedly the intent in Titus 3:5 with the washing of regeneration. 1 Corinthians 6:11 is another text where Paul uses washing to differentiate between the uncleanness of sin and the washing of the saved. However, washing refers directly to sanctification in Ephesians 5:26 with the washing of the Word and even indirectly in 1 Corinthians 6:11. Hoyt concludes, “The spiritual reality that is symbolized, however, is indicated by verses 10 and 11. This washing of feet does not have to do with the initial act of salvation, for that is symbolized by baptism. But it does have to do with daily cleansing from the defilement of sin.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, there is a washing of regeneration and a washing of sanctification. Footwashing does not need to symbolize both senses.

Jesus is an example of humility to his disciples, but the sign of footwashing must be more. Footwashing is not just a sign of humility because this washing was not merely a customary footwashing but something Jesus intended to commemorate as a theological symbol.<sup>44</sup> A cultural footwashing would have occurred as everyone walked in

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<sup>42</sup> Plaster, *Ordinances*, 59. Calvin sees sanctification in this passage as well: “The children of God are not altogether regenerated on the first day, so as to aim at nothing but the heavenly life; but, on the contrary, the remains of the flesh continue to dwell in them, with which they maintain a continued struggle throughout their whole life. The term *feet*, therefore, is metaphorically applied to all the passions and cares by which we are brought into contact with the world; for, if the Holy Spirit occupied every part of us, we would no longer have anything to do with the pollutions of the world; but now, by that part in which we are carnal, we creep on the ground, or at least fix our feet in the clay, and, therefore, are to some extent unclean. Thus Christ always finds in us something to cleanse. What is here spoken of is not the forgiveness of sins, but the renewal, by which Christ, by gradual and uninterrupted succession, delivers his followers entirely from the sinful desires of the flesh.” Calvin, *John*, 2:59.

<sup>43</sup> Hoyt, *This Do in Remembrance of Me*, 72.

<sup>44</sup> Plaster explains the differences of the social custom and Jesus’s actions: “Social Custom: (a) Usually performed by a servant or by the guest himself; (b) Performed immediately upon entering the house; (c) Performed at the door. The Action of Jesus: (a) Performed by the Master Himself; (b) Performed after a considerable lapse of time *during the meal*; (c) Performed at the table.” Plaster, *Ordinances*, 114.

the door and not during supper.<sup>45</sup> As one considers the command of Jesus to do to others as he has done, the theological symbolism of sanctification in footwashing, she can see that footwashing is an appropriate and reasonable inclusion in the communion service.

### **Church Application of Footwashing**

Suggesting the application of footwashing in many contexts will be met with confusion and hesitation. Footwashing is not an everyday cultural practice for many believers, so natural barriers hold up participation. Nevertheless, footwashing need not be a regular cultural practice for it to be helpful in our Communion liturgy. One may argue with the biblical and theological reasoning, yet the beauty of the footwashing is impossible to miss. Witherington makes such a concession: “There is nothing to rule out its [footwashing] being a viable expression of the message of Christ about cleansing and forgiveness.”<sup>46</sup>

Footwashing in the context of Threefold Communion provides an appropriate opportunity for personal examination and repentance and a reminder of humility before others in the church. In 1 Corinthians 11:27-32, Paul warns that they are not to eat the bread and drink the cup in an unworthy manner. Since footwashing is the symbol associated with the present ministry of Christ, this part of the communion service provides the correct space to confess sin and reconcile to others in the church.<sup>47</sup>

Threefold Communion is a comprehensive ordinance for the whole Christian life. Jesus provides the example and command of footwashing to remind believers of his present ministry through his Spirit to sanctify them through the Word. Applying this

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<sup>45</sup> Yoder, *God's Means of Grace*, 298-303. Yoder provides a helpful explanation of why Jesus washing the disciple's feet is more than the customary washing of the day.

<sup>46</sup> Witherington, *Making a Meal of It*, 84. Witherington includes a profound story from his own experience in a Threefold Communion service. He may not agree that the practice is biblically necessary, but he cannot deny its practical beauty and benefit.

<sup>47</sup> Hoyt, *This Do in Remembrance of Me*, 84.

practice in a communion service will enrich believers by providing an opportunity for examination, confession, and humility.

### **The Bread and Cup**

When thinking of Communion or the Lord's Supper, most people refer to the Eucharist, or bread and cup.<sup>48</sup> Since virtually every Christian congregation practices the bread and cup, some think exclusively about bread and cup as Communion. Threefold Communion does not make less of the bread and cup at the elevation of the love feast and footwashing. In fact, including the love feast and footwashing can make more of the Eucharist. Since there is widespread agreement on this symbol, the Eucharist may carry a unique role and precedent within Threefold Communion since, without the death of Christ, ongoing change and the hope of consummation lose their significance. Nevertheless, it is essential to see the Eucharist in the context of the Threefold Communion. The biblical evidence and theological symbolism of the bread and cup become richer in the context of Threefold Communion; the application will be more meaningful than just an additional element at the end of a worship service.

### **Biblical Precedent for the Bread and Cup**

The biblical rationale for the bread and cup begins in the Synoptic Gospels. Their respective accounts of Jesus's words and actions are very similar. Matthew 26:26-29 "Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for man for the forgiveness of sins.'" Mark's only difference is that he includes, "poured out for many" (Mark 14:24). Luke's version is the most extensive and he includes the critical phrase, "Do this in remembrance of me"

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<sup>48</sup> I will use Eucharist and bread and cup interchangeably.

(Luke 22:19). The example and then the command of Jesus to practice this sign makes it an enduring symbol for the church.

Outside of the Synoptics, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is the only significant discussion about the bread and cup, and that discussion is still in the context of a whole meal or feast. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul uses the bread and cup to contrast the table of the Lord and the table of the world.<sup>49</sup> Then, in chapter 11, Paul quotes Jesus and shows Jesus's authority and institution of the sign:

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that 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 he also took the cup, after Supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Cor 11:23-26)<sup>50</sup>

Remarkably, a sign with such rich meaning in the church's life is relatively limited in its biblical discussion. However, just like the love feast and footwashing, the quantity of biblical passages does not make for its perpetual nature, but the speaker's authority and its clarity of symbolic meaning.

### **Theological Symbolism of Bread and Cup**

The present and future realities of salvation are significant because of a single act of God in Christ that took place at a specific moment in redemptive history. The historical act of Jesus's death on the cross is the pivotal moment in history, and the signs of the bread and cup symbolize that historical moment until Jesus returns. Jesus's death

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<sup>49</sup> The meals the early church enjoyed together were in direct contrast to the meals of pagans. Fee explains, "In this case, it is especially important to observe that this meal [The Lord's Supper] is not the focus of Paul's concern; the sacred pagan meals addressed in vv. 19-21 are." Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 465.

<sup>50</sup> Fee's explanation of the passage is worth including as he calls it an unusual moment: "Since this is a 'tradition' the Corinthians are *not* keeping (vv. 2, 17, 22), Paul feels compelled to remind them of its significance by repeating the actual words of institution. The result is a highly unusual moment in the extant letters of Paul since it is the only instance where he cites at some length the Jesus traditions that would eventually appear in our Gospels." Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 545.

provides the foundation for the doctrine of justification,<sup>51</sup> and the bread and cup serve as the symbol of this theological truth.<sup>52</sup>

**The bread and cup and justification.** The doctrine of justification is one of the most significant doctrines in Christianity and has been the source of many debates throughout church history.<sup>53</sup> One of the central storylines in the Bible is how woefully wicked sinners are reconciled with a holy God.<sup>54</sup> Justification answers this question and declares that sinners are made right with God by faith alone in Christ alone. As Jesus shares the bread and cup, he tells his disciples that his broken body and shed blood is the foundation for the new covenant. His work on the cross accomplishes all the requirements for God's wrath against sin. Paul, then, theologically explains Jesus's death on the cross and how God justifies sinners through faith in Christ (Rom 3:21-26).

The cross of Christ is central to Christianity, and it is clear how the symbols of bread and wine serve to remind believers of the truth of justification. Hoyt writes that virtually all Christians practice the eucharist not because the sign has more biblical evidence than footwashing or the love feast but because its theological truth is rich. Hoyt goes on, "But it is because this ordinance points to the supreme ministry of Christ on the

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<sup>51</sup> Allison provides a help and consistent definition, "A mighty act of God by which he declares sinful people not guilty but righteous instead. He does so by imputing, or crediting, the perfect righteousness of Christ to them. Thus, while they are not actually righteous, God views them as being so because of Christ's righteousness. The first aspect is the forgiveness of sins, resulting from Christ's substitutionary death (Rom. 3:25; 5:9). The second aspect is imputation, resulting from Christ's obedience that makes people righteous (5:18-19). This Protestant view contrasts with the Catholic view that justification is not only forgiveness of sins but also regeneration and sanctification." Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 120.

<sup>52</sup> Hoyt, *This Do in Remembrance of Me*, 106.

<sup>53</sup> J. V. Fesko, *Justification: Understanding the Classic Reformed Doctrine* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 6-55.

<sup>54</sup> Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 69.

cross, the ministry laid the foundation for the Christian faith and invested the gospel with the central message of life and hope. This ordinance is important for this very reason.”<sup>55</sup>

Justification by faith alone is at the heart of the Christian gospel, and Jesus instituted the bread and cup as signs associated with his finished work on the cross. These symbols serve as proclaimers of that gospel until Jesus returns. Plaster understands the dual nature of the bread and cup, “It is a remembrance or memorial and this provides a vivid picture of Christ and his work on the cross. It is a twofold message that both looks back on the cross and looks forward until the day he comes. His body and blood are symbolized in the Eucharist as a reminder of the sacrifice for sin involved in the salvation of believers.”<sup>56</sup>

### **Church Application of Bread and Cup**

Discussions about the practice of Communion in the local church typically revolve around questions of frequency of participation, who should participate, and preparing oneself for participation. Those are meaningful discussions, but since the bread and cup is nearly a unanimous practice among Christians, this application section will focus on the context of Threefold Communion. Threefold Communion is a better context for the bread and cup for two reasons: first, Communion is exclusive to believers; therefore, the love feast is the proper setting to gather the church. Second, self-examination, reflection, and repentance should precede the bread and cup; therefore, footwashing is an appropriate practice before taking the bread and cup. Understanding the unity of Threefold Communion reveals not a lessening of Communion’s place in the church; instead, it demonstrates a priority and reverence for the ordinance.

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<sup>55</sup> Hoyt, *This Do in Remembrance of Me*, 97.

<sup>56</sup> Plaster, *Ordinances*, 65.

**The love feast is the correct context.** Communion is an exclusive practice for believers. The Bible gives no hint that non-Christians could share in this ordinance. The early church refused to allow a non-baptized person participate in the Eucharist as the Didache makes explicit, “But none shall eat or shall drink from your Eucharist but those baptized in the name of the Lord; for also concerning this the Lord has said, ‘Do give not what is holy to the dogs.’”<sup>57</sup> From its earliest days, the Brethren church maintained a believers-only practice.<sup>58</sup> As has already been discussed, the early church practiced the Eucharist in the context of the love feast, and this was a wise application because it was an exclusive gathering for believers. Those who practice Communion in a public worship service need to consider whether they are appropriately fencing the table. Certainly, it is always possible for a non-Christian or someone who wrongly perceives themselves to be a Christian to participate. However, the love feast provides a set-aside time where the church can explicitly gather with only believers.

**Footwashing is preparation.** A season of preparation should precede taking the eucharist. Paul warns of taking the bread and cup in an unworthy manner (1 Cor 11:27), and he goes on to encourage a kind of self-reflection, “Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat the bread and drink the cup” (1 Cor 11:28). There is some disagreement about what Paul means precisely. However, Paul is likely encouraging believers to repent of known sin and reconcile with other Christians.<sup>59</sup> Fee explains, “This is not a call for deep personal introspection to determine whether one is worthy of

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<sup>57</sup> *Didache* 9.5, in *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation*, trans. Rick Brannan (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2017), 136

<sup>58</sup> Alexander Mack, “Rights and Ordinances,” in *The Complete Writings of Alexander Mack*, ed. William Eberly (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1991), 63. Cf. Yoder, *God’s Means of Grace*, 394.

<sup>59</sup> Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 406-7. Allison clarifies that Paul does not prohibit *unworthy participants* but warns against *unworthy participation*. Allison goes on to point out that this time of preparation is not meant for searching out unconfessed sin, but for mending broken relationships. Allison’s corrective is helpful, yet it is possible to see the preparation time as both an opportunity to confess sin which may include restoring a relationship with a fellow church member.

the table. Rather, it stands in contrast to the ‘divine examination’ to which unworthy participation will lead.”<sup>60</sup> The personal season of reflection provides a space for an individual to examine her life and mend relationships.<sup>61</sup> Imagine the rich symbolism of water running over feet and into a basin after a person has confessed his sin. Consider further the posture of humility as reconciled sisters in the Lord wash each other’s feet. For those who do not believe footwashing to be a vital sign, it is difficult to argue with the beautiful imagery it provides in the context of Threefold Communion.

**The bread and cup is the culmination.** The Eucharist is the climax of the Communion service instead of an additional element of a public gathering. The love feast provides the context for the gathered church, and footwashing allows believers to prepare themselves and reconcile with fellow members before taking the bread and cup.

### Conclusion

Threefold Communion is an appropriate and beautiful application in light of the past, present, and future work of Christ. It is also a rich symbol for the Christian life as the love feast gathers the church and symbolizes glorification. Footwashing allows believers to examine themselves and symbolizes sanctification. Finally, the bread and cup cause believers to remember and proclaim the death of Christ while symbolizing justification. Advocates of Threefold Communion do not intend to be intentionally unique or innovative but are seeking to make the most sense of all the biblical evidence. This practice may be unique compared to other applications, but it is a faithful

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<sup>60</sup> Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 561.

<sup>61</sup> Yoder understands that a season of preparation should precede the Lord’s Supper for both individual and relational purposes: “The Lord’s Supper should always be preceded by spiritual preparation. There should be special services to explain the reasons for the service, so as to strengthen faith, and induce proper preparation on the part of the members. This should be accompanied by visitation of all the members by the pastor and others appointed for the work. Every effort should be made to have the church in love and harmony, so that all the members will commune if possible, and that worthily. The early church prepared by a period of fasting, which was not at all a bad idea. If the modern church would fast a little more and feast a little less it would enter into the spirit of the service a little better.” Yoder, *God’s Means of Grace*, 407.

application in light of the biblical evidence, theological symbolism, and reverence for the ordinance.

Each symbol of the Threefold Communion service is essential, but their unity creates a beautiful image. Plaster captures the unity of the service, which is worth including to close this chapter:

The three parts of the Communion service do have a certain unity that ties them together. That unity is based on the fact that a harmonization of the Gospel demonstrates that Jesus in the course of the meal on that last night brought all three parts to the attention of His disciples. Together they do provide an effective overview of the relationship of the believer to Christ. The most effective what to put them into the same kind of relationship as experienced by the disciples that night would be to practice them together.<sup>62</sup>

The richness of Threefold Communion is evident in its biblical and theological symbolism. Going further in this study will reveal the formational benefit of this practice as the Holy Spirit works among the people in the gathering.

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<sup>62</sup> Plaster, *Ordinances*, 66.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THREEFOLD COMMUNION

Like most from the Anabaptist tradition, those who practice Threefold Communion hold a memorial view of the ordinances.<sup>1</sup> The symbolic view should not lead people to think that the ordinances are optional because they are mere symbols. Nevertheless, as David Plaster admits, “A comparison of attendance at Communion services with the membership roll of the local church may well indicate that the charge has an aspect of truthfulness to it.”<sup>2</sup> Plaster’s warning is helpful and vital for anyone who maintains a memorial view of the Communion. The memorial conviction stands in contrast to various spiritual presence views.<sup>3</sup> However, a better discussion is not where God is, but what God is doing through the Communion service.

One potential underdeveloped discussion relates to the role of the Holy Spirit in the Lord’s Supper. This chapter will focus specifically on the Holy Spirit’s formational role and work in and through Communion,<sup>4</sup> which is a Christological sign empowered by

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<sup>1</sup> David R. Plaster, *Ordinances: What Are They?* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1985), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Plaster, *Ordinances*, 40.

<sup>3</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *50 Core Truths of the Christian Faith: A Guide to Teaching and Understanding Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 331-32. Allison provides a helpful summary of the major views: (1) Transubstantiation: a Roman Catholic doctrine that the bread is changed into the body of Christ and the wine is changed into the blood of Christ; (2) Consubstantiation: the Lutheran view that Christ is truly present “in, with, and under” the substance of bread and wine; (3) Memorial: the Zwinglian view that the Lord’s Supper is a memorial of the death of Christ; (4) Spiritual Presence, the Reformed view that the bread and wine are symbols, but they are empowered by Christ’s spiritual presence through the Holy Spirit.

<sup>4</sup> As Michael Horton advises, “We should not be looking for the *works that are done uniquely by the Holy Spirit* but the *unique role of the Holy Spirit in every work*.” Michael Horton, *Rediscovering the Holy Spirit: God’s Perfecting Presence in Creation, Redemption, and Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 41 (emphasis original).

the Holy Spirit to change and unify his people.<sup>5</sup> First, I will examine two works of the Holy Spirit in the Communion service: (1) he works through Communion to sanctify his people through remembrance and self-examination; (2) the Holy Spirit works through Communion to unify the church. Second, I will conclude by explaining how a Threefold Communion service, particularly through the love feast and footwashing, is the best application in light of the Holy Spirit's role.

### **The Holy Spirit and Communion**

Communion is a Christological sign as it uniquely memorializes Jesus's death. Nevertheless, it is pneumatological, meaning that the Holy Spirit is the appropriator and animator of the church's communion with the risen Christ. Graham Cole expresses caution in specifying the Holy Spirit's role in the ordinances.<sup>6</sup> Cole is hesitant to see the Supper's pneumatological influence because of a lack of biblical evidence that specifically describes the Holy Spirit's work in the ordinances and even cautions against those who place an unbalanced amount of significance in the signs themselves.<sup>7</sup> His corrective, however, could lead some to misunderstand and miss the Holy Spirit's impact through the Communion service. If the Spirit is not at least using the Lord's Supper for some kind of spiritual transformation, then believers may rightly wonder if this sign has true meaning for the modern church.

Confusion regarding the Holy Spirit's work in the Lord's Supper may be the result of a one-dimensional view of the ordinance. If this ongoing new covenant ritual takes place in a matter of moments with a piece of bread and a sip of wine, then it is logical why theologians would fight and divide over the spiritual nature of that "meal."

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<sup>5</sup> The Holy Spirit's work in Threefold Communion is not a frequent discussion. Nevertheless, I will show how Threefold Communion is an appropriate application in light of the Holy Spirit's role.

<sup>6</sup> Graham Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 224.

<sup>7</sup> Cole, *He Who Gives Life*, 224.

However, if the ordinance is multidimensional or comprehensive with various elements and facets, the spiritual nature may be more apparent.<sup>8</sup>

The Spirit's presence in the Communion service is an appropriate discussion, yet his effect through the sign has a more critical impact.<sup>9</sup> There are two specific works of the Holy Spirit through Communion: First, the Holy Spirit works through the Lord's Supper to sanctify believers through remembering and proclaiming Christ. Secondly, the Holy Spirit works through Communion to unify the church.

### **The Holy Spirit Works through Communion to Sanctify His People**

The Holy Spirit utilizes Communion to transform the people of God. He does this by reminding believers of Christ's death on the cross and through self-examination and repentance of sin. These two ideas continue to accentuate the multifaceted nature of this ongoing ordinance. As these connections unfold, it becomes clear that spiritual change occurs as people celebrate their union with Christ, but they do so by remembering him and continually confessing sin.

### **Sanctification through Remembrance**

Luke records Jesus saying, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). Paul repeats this phrase as well in 1 Corinthians 10:24-25. Remembering the death of Christ is a central element of the Communion service, and the Holy Spirit is the one who brings these memories to God's people, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance

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<sup>8</sup> The application section of this chapter will show how Threefold Communion, consisting of the love feast, footwashing, and bread and cup, is an appropriate application in light of Holy Spirit's work in Communion.

<sup>9</sup> Gregg Allison provides a great discussion on Augustine's views of the unity of the church through the Lord's Supper: "Thus, for Augustine, the Lord's Supper portrays the unity of church members and challenges them to live genuinely as members of the body of Christ." Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 371.

all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). It may be more than coincidental that the Spirit is the one who would remind them of the very things that Jesus stated, “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). The Holy Spirit is serving memories of Christ’s death so that Jesus’s followers will remember his finished work on the cross to pay for the sins of his people.

Linking the Spirit’s mission of remembrance with Jesus’s institution of the Supper highlights the Son and the Spirit’s relationship. Gregg Allison and Andreas Köstenberger comment on this relationship in the Farewell Discourse: “The ministry of the Spirit remains closely linked to Jesus. Just as Jesus is the Sent One who is fully dependent on and obedient to the Father, so is the Spirit said to be ‘sent’ by both the Father and Jesus (14:26; 15:26) and to illumine the Spiritual significance of God’s work in Jesus (14:26; 15:26; 16:9).”<sup>10</sup> As Christ tells his disciples to take the bread and the cup in his memory, he does not tell them it is something they will do by their own power or use of natural senses. Instead, the Holy Spirit works his ministry of memory so that as believers commune with one another and the risen Christ, they recall the work of the gospel.

A good memory possesses enormous power and the bread and cup have the same power to recall the cross.<sup>11</sup> John Calvin writes that while the Lord’s Supper:

calls to remembrance that Christ was made the Bread of Life that we may constantly eat him, it gives us a taste and relish for that bread and makes us feel its efficacy. For it assures us, first, that whatever Christ did or suffered was done to give us life; and secondly, that this quickening is eternal; by it we are ceaselessly nourished, sustained, and preserved in life.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gregg R. Allison and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, Theology for the People of God (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 74-75.

<sup>11</sup> A simple smell or taste can nearly hypnotize a person back to a meaningful experience, place, or person. A whiff of perfume or the taste of a favorite dish can unlock a flood of memories for an individual.

<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 4.17.5.

Calvin is not suggesting that the communion bread is efficacious in itself; rather, he is saying that upon tasting the bread, believers remind themselves that Christ is the Bread of Life. As physical food sustains and gives life, Jesus is food for the soul since a person cannot live on bread alone, but sustains herself through the food of Scripture and the bread of Christ (Matt 4:4; John 6:53).

The work of remembering is not merely an intellectual activity but one that stirs joy, delight, and religious affection. John Owen says that Communion is a commemorative exercise, which leads to the happiness of God's people, "And there is no greater joy to the heart of sinners, and a man knows not how to give greater glory to God, than to call the atonement of sin unto remembrance."<sup>13</sup> In Owen's mind, the act of remembrance is not a lesser activity but, as one considers fond memories of the past that stir joy, recalling the death of Christ produces deep happiness for the believer.

The Spirit also works through declaring the Lord's death through the Communion service. Paul wrote of Communion's proclamation ministry as he corrected the Corinthians, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). Jesus's Farewell Discourse in John tells us that the Helper will bear witness about Christ (John 15:26). Jesus goes on further in John 16:13 to clarify that the Spirit will guide believers in all truth and will only declare what he hears. The Apostle Peter writes of the Holy Spirit's preaching ministry in his first epistle, "It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things which angels long to look" (1 Pet 1:12).

Speaking and proclamation is another arena where Christians should look for the Spirit's work. After extensive quoting from the Old and New Testaments, Allison and

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<sup>13</sup> John Owen, "Discourse III," in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 9, *Posthumous Sermons*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 536.

Köstenberger state, “This significant sampling of biblical passages underscores that one of the divine works appropriated to the Holy Spirit is speaking. God is a speaking God (Heb 1:1), with the terminus of the divine speech in the Holy Spirit (Heb 3:7; 10:15).”<sup>14</sup>

Remembrance and proclamation are two sides of the same coin of the Lord’s Supper. Proclaiming is remembering, and remembering is proclaiming. James Hamilton says, “the simple gospel message is presented in the retelling of what Jesus did on the night He was betrayed. This reiterates the need every member of the church has for the sacrifice of Christ.”<sup>15</sup> The church proclaims Christ to one another. The church addresses one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs and gives thanks in the name of Christ (Eph 5:19-20). The way the church speaks to one another reveals the Spirit’s work in their midst as Paul commands them to be “filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5:18). Even if the Lord’s Supper is not central to this text, there is no doubt the Spirit is working through the proclamation of the gospel in the church. In light of understanding that the Spirit uses proclamation and remembrance, it is fair to conclude that the Holy Spirit uses the Supper to sanctify the church.

### **Sanctification through Self-Examination**

The Holy Spirit works through the Communion service so that participants remember and proclaim the death of Christ on their behalf, which creates spiritual change and transformation in their lives. Sanctification through Communion requires a clear definition because respective camps may agree on the statement “The Holy Spirit sanctifies his people through the Lord’s Supper” and yet have vastly different definitions. This section will show how the new covenant nature of Communion points to the Holy

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<sup>14</sup> Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 286-28.

<sup>15</sup> James M. Hamilton Jr., “The Lord’s Supper in Paul: An Identity-Forming Proclamation of the Gospel,” in *The Lord’s Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 88-89.

Spirit's indwelling and how indwelling leads to ongoing repentance, washing, and faith in Christ.<sup>16</sup>

Intriguingly, John makes no explicit mention of the Lord's Supper in his Gospel. There is a possible allusion in John 6; however, footwashing, not the bread and cup, takes center stage (John 13:1-20). Jonathan Pennington encourages Gospel readers to allow the writers enough flexibility to "accommodate this difference between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel."<sup>17</sup> John would have certainly been aware of the bread and cup, yet he chooses to highlight footwashing and Jesus's prayer for unity.<sup>18</sup> If readers conclude, as Pennington does, that the Last Supper in the Synoptics is the same meal as the discourse described in John 13-17, it is noteworthy that Jesus spends so much time discussing the coming Holy Spirit.<sup>19</sup> After he washed the disciple's feet, Jesus began his Farewell Discourse, in which he deliberately teaches about the Holy Spirit, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26).

The discussion above comes into a clearer view when considering the Lord's Supper as the new covenant sign. Pennington asserts, "the symbolic act of the Last Supper pictures the inauguration of the new covenant in Christ."<sup>20</sup> One of the promises of the new covenant is the indwelling nature of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "This cup that is

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<sup>16</sup> Allison and Köstenberger assert that we should consider the ordinances as within the speech act theory as "signed speech acts": "As with speech acts, signed speech acts have three aspects: (1) that which is signed, (2) the force of that which is signed, and (3) the effect of that which is signed." Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 448. Bread and wine (and possibly a feast and footwashing) serve as signs with verbal force that lead to action in the participants.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan T. Pennington, "The Lord's Last Supper in the Fourfold Witness of the Gospels," in Schreiner and Crawford, *The Lord's Supper*, 37.

<sup>18</sup> Pennington, "The Lord's Last Supper in the Fourfold Witness," 37.

<sup>19</sup> Pennington, "The Lord's Last Supper in the Fourfold Witness," 38. I conclude that the meal in John is the same meal described in the Synoptics, disagreeing with Ben Witherington, who separates the meals, saying that this is "a Greco-Roman banquet complete with closing symposium and the religious rites associated with such a meal." Ben Witherington III, *Making a Meal of It: Rethinking the Theology of the Lord's Supper* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press), 65.

<sup>20</sup> Pennington, "The Lord's Last Supper in the Fourfold Witness," 51.

poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). If Gospel readers see the Supper through a new covenant lens (Ezek 36:25-27), then the Holy Spirit naturally becomes a primary actor in the ordinance. If the Synoptics were the only accounts, this case might be more challenging to prove. However, with John’s extended retelling of Jesus’s teaching of the Holy Spirit, it is reasonable to see his sanctifying work through Communion.<sup>21</sup> Understanding the Holy Spirit’s new covenant activity allows believers to enjoy the benefits of his indwelling presence. The new covenant gift is central to the new covenant sign.

The indwelling presence of the Spirit guarantees that all who trust in Christ will know and enjoy God. Owen preached that there is simultaneously a remembrance of love toward Christ and a remembrance of faith in the ordinance.<sup>22</sup> Many relationships mature through a series of positive memories. Recalling these experiences with a particular individual, be they a friend, spouse, or child, motivates a more profound and more present love for that person. For Owen, remembering Christ in the Supper produces a change in the participant, “there are three things wherein this remembrance of Christ by love, in the celebration of this ordinance, doth consist: - delight in him, thankfulness unto him, and the keeping of his word. He that remembers Christ with love, hath these three affections in his heart.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, the Lord’s Supper encourages believers to delight in God, thank him for his blessing, and obey him in more profound joy. This moves participants toward obedience, primarily through the doorway of confession and faith.

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<sup>21</sup> While the Lord’s Supper is not in view in 1 Cor 6 or Titus 3, the Spirit’s washing in both regeneration and sanctification is clear. 1 Cor 6:11: “And such were some of you, but you were washing, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” Titus 3:5-6: “He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.”

<sup>22</sup> Owen, “Discourse III,” 537.

<sup>23</sup> Owen, “Discourse III,” 537.

Discerning what Paul means by eating the bread and drinking the cup in an unworthy manner is difficult. Calvin says there could be several degrees of unworthiness, ranging from someone in open sin who does not repent to a person with no known sin, yet he or she still does not examine himself or herself.<sup>24</sup> The acts of examination and repentance should be mainstays in the Communion service. Believers have the opportunity to consider their lives and confess their sins to the Lord. Paul commands, “Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:28). This admonition does not mean a person must become clean before being “worthy” to participate in Jesus’s body and blood. Calvin says, “let no man approach who is not properly and duly prepared.”<sup>25</sup> In this light, a believer recognizes the Holy Spirit’s ongoing sanctifying attributes. Allison and Köstenberger explain that the Holy Spirit sanctifies through convicting of sin, exposing hidden faults, and comforting in times of trouble.<sup>26</sup> It seems unmistakable that the Communion service is an ideal setting to include moments set aside for examination, confession, repentance, and renewed faith.

The Holy Spirit’s sanctifying role works through the Lord’s Supper to deepen the love and affection a believer has for the Lord and lead the believer to more in-depth examination, repentance of sin, and a faithful walk with Christ. One aspect of this self-inspection is to discern known conflict with other believers so that they might experience gospel reconciliation in the body of Christ.

### **The Holy Spirit Works through Communion to Unify the Church**

The examination process before or during Communion is not merely an act of vertical relationship with God, but a horizontal act with fellow believers. The Lord’s

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<sup>24</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, trans. William Pringle, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 385.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Corinthians*, 1:387.

<sup>26</sup> Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 407.

Supper is a place for all who call Jesus Lord. Communion is the climax of local church unity because God's people participate together in the body and blood of Christ. There are two reasons for this celebration of unity: first, the Communion service is exclusive to Spirit-indwelt believers; and second, Communion celebrates the unity of the Spirit as brothers and sisters gather in humility, reconciliation, and deference instead of worldly favoritism. The Spirit's unifying work in the Lord's Supper is evident as these layers unfold.

### **Communion Is Exclusive to Believers**

The Holy Spirit is the foundation for unity in the local church. Paul's letter to the Ephesians describes how the Holy Spirit is the unifier of God's people. Through the Holy Spirit, all Christians, regardless of ethnicity or other differences, have access in one Spirit to the Father (Eph 2:18). The church is now being built into a dwelling place for God by or in the Spirit (2:22). Believers walk with one another and maintain the Spirit's unity (4:3). As there is one body, there is one Spirit over all (4:4). Forgiven people who withhold forgiveness grieve the Holy Spirit (4:30-32). The filling of the Spirit changes how believers interact together through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (5:18-20). Finally, the Holy Spirit equips believers with tools, the Word of God and prayer, to engage in the spiritual battle (6:18). The unity of the church is directly related to the Holy Spirit's activity.

The aspirational unity presented to the church in Ephesus was not descriptive of the church in Corinth. While writing to the division plagued congregation, Paul addresses the issue of unity among them. He writes that participating in Christ's body through the Lord's Supper represents the many members genuinely being part of one body (1 Cor 10:16-17). Fee comments, "there can be little doubt that Paul intends to emphasize the kind of bonding relationship of the worshipers with one another that this

meal expresses.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the church has traditionally held that only believers participate in the Lord’s Table. The exclusivity of the gathering should not incite an arrogant posture toward outsiders so much as promote a humble privilege for insiders.

Restricting the Lord’s Table to believers is consistent with the church’s nature and identity as God’s new covenant people. One reason modern believers struggle with the inclusion and exclusion of individuals in Communion is related to underdeveloped definitions of the church. Allison provides a helpful corrective, “The church is the people of God who have been saved through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and have been incorporated into his body through baptism with the Holy Spirit.”<sup>28</sup> Paul clarifies that one cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons (1 Cor. 10:21). As Malcolm MacLean warns, “the Lord’s Supper is not a converting ordinance.”<sup>29</sup> One must identify with the local church through confession of faith, baptism, and a Spirit-filled life. If the Holy Spirit’s indwelling nature is a primary promise and fulfillment of the new covenant, then it only makes sense that those who have received the Holy Spirit in conversion would participate in the New Covenant sign.

### **The Unity of the Spirit in Communion**

Paul writes of the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11; he does so, in part, to address the divisions among the church. Some of these divisions are right because they reveal the difference between actual and false believers.<sup>30</sup> However, some divisions existed among believers that were not in keeping with the body of Christ. Some believers

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<sup>27</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 466.

<sup>28</sup> Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 29. Cf. Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 392. Allison and Köstenberger affirm that baptism with the Holy Spirit is the initiatory action “that takes place at the beginning of salvation and occurs in conjunction with hearing the gospel, repentance from sin, belief in Christ, forgiveness of sins, and water baptism.”

<sup>29</sup> Malcolm MacLean, *The Lord’s Supper* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2009), 216.

<sup>30</sup> Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 538.

went ahead with the party instead of waiting for the rest of the church. A celebration intended to unify the church turned into a worldly carnival of drunkenness and favoritism.<sup>31</sup>

Local church gatherings were to take on a completely different atmosphere than the assemblies of non-Christians. The presence of the Holy Spirit changes the atmosphere of Christian gatherings. Paul writes in Ephesians 5:18-19, “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart.” The Spirit-filled songs of the church should stand against the alcohol-filled songs of the pub.

Spirit-filled Christians look not to their own interests, but the interests of others because a Christlike humility guides and shapes their concerns (Phil 2:1-11). Favoritism toward the wealthy does not mark a church, but honoring the poor and needy (Jas 2:1-13). These Spirit-led acts of humility are highlighted in John 13 as Jesus washes his disciples’ feet (John 13:1-20). If the Communion ordinance is a place of humility and deference to one another, it is difficult to improve on the sign that Jesus gave his followers. The Communion service is a beautiful picture of unity as the church shares a meal, waits for one another, both rich and poor, and then rises from that meal to wash one another’s feet. Christ’s humility and service are on full display through his people.

The examination is vertical, allowing a person to consider their sins before God, but the examination is also horizontal so that fellow Christians can reconcile relationships. Fee writes, “Before they participate in the meal, they should examine themselves in terms of their attitudes toward the body, how they are treating others, since

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<sup>31</sup> Witherington places this section of 1 Corinthians against the backdrop of feast and symposium in the Roman Empire. These meals were typically religious in nature and involved consuming large quantities of meat and later a large drinking party. Witherington, *Making a Meal of It*, 34-38.

the meal itself is a place of proclaiming the gospel.”<sup>32</sup> It is only logical that church members would reconcile with one another before confessing their reconciliation to God through Christ. Allison summarizes how the Lord’s Supper nurtures and portrays church unity, “the observation of the Lord’s Supper is to be preceded by self-examination to ensure that those who participate do so in a worthy manner; that is, with love and out of deference to others and without a hint of divisiveness.”<sup>33</sup> As Spirit-indwelt brothers and sisters come to remember and proclaim the death of Christ, the net effect is unity as they serve one another and reconcile to one another. This process of service, confession, and forgiveness deepens local church unity.

### **Church Application**

Understanding the Holy Spirit’s work through Communion to transform and unite believers should lead churches to examine how their practices foster and celebrate the Holy Spirit. I maintain that Threefold Communion is the best application in light of the Holy Spirit’s ministry in the ordinance. Threefold Communion is the best application for two reasons: first, the love feast provides more significant space for the church to express its unity. Second, footwashing is a sign and reminder of the Spirit’s work to transform believers.

### **Recover the Love Feast**

Contemporary churches would do well to recover the ancient practice of a love feast as the context for their Communion services. This would require that the church celebrate the Lord’s Supper outside of the regular worship service. Many Christians may understand the Holy Spirit’s work of conviction of sin and the participant’s work to examine themselves, but fewer believers likely recognize the role of Communion in

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<sup>32</sup> Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 562.

<sup>33</sup> Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 395.

unifying local churches. Russell Moore mentions that one need not embrace a sacramental view of the Lord's Supper merely in the elements of bread and wine; he goes further to suggest, "they must recapture the vision of the eschatological banquet – and seek to recover the joyfulness and triumph of this even within their own churches."<sup>34</sup> These gatherings should ring with joy, celebration, and singing. Moore continues his application by saying the communion with Christ and the church culminated in feasts that included a meal.<sup>35</sup> Moore does little to discuss the Holy Spirit's role in this process, although he asserts that "the New Testament assumes Christ is *always present* with his people (Matt 28:20), organically and mystically united to his church as a head is united to a body (Eph 5:23)."<sup>36</sup> The headship of Christ and the unity of the body are essential elements of Communion.

The Sunday morning worship service may not be the best place to enjoy this most unifying of events. A bite of bread and a sip of wine seem but an appetizer of the larger picture of unity displayed in the Bible and the early church. As Herman Bavinck admits:

In that early period the Lord's Supper was celebrated in conjunction with an ordinary meal (Acts 20:7, 11; 1 Cor. 11:21), in the congregation's public assembly (1 Cor. 10:17; 11:18, 20-21, 33), and daily or at least every Lord's Day (Acts 2:46; 20:7). Only gradually was the Lord's Supper detached from the love feasts, shifted from the evening to the morning service, and administered also to the sick and dying in their homes totally outside of and apart from a meeting of the congregation and the frequency of celebration was set for believers at three times or at least one a year as a minimum.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Russell Moore, "Baptist View: Christ's Presence as Memorial," in *Understanding Four Views of the Lord's Supper*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 33.

<sup>35</sup> Moore, "Baptist View," 41.

<sup>36</sup> Moore, "Baptist View," 39.

<sup>37</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *The Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 564.

The early church was correct to gather together for a feast. This meal presented them with extended time together and allowed the church to display their unity amidst their diversity.

Recovering this practice is undoubtedly inconvenient, at least in Western society. The bread and cup offered at the end of a worship service make a great deal of sense in an individualistic culture. However, as Allison says, “Though one cannot insist on a return to the ancient practice of observing the Lord's Supper in the context of an agape feast, such a *ressourcement* would provide some much needed help.”<sup>38</sup> Admittedly, there is no imperative in the New Testament for the observance of the love feast.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, Plaster makes a valiant appeal, “Nowhere is there any passage which places the practice of the Eucharist (bread and cup) outside the context of a meal.”<sup>40</sup> Despite no clear biblical command, 1 Corinthians 11 assumes the practice and churches would do well to recover this event. The setting provides a more advantageous place to serve one another and to know fellow brothers and sisters on a deeper level. The Holy Spirit works during this meal, even in the most ordinary ways.

The love feast provides an opportunity for the church to share with and instruct one another. Ephesians 5:18-21 and Colossians 3:15-17 serve as helpful contrasts to the abuses of the church gathering in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. Spirit-filled believers can use the love feast to encourage one another and testify to Christ's work in their lives. If churches considered gathering for Communion in the context of a love feast, it is possible to imagine Andrew Wilson's vision for a “Eucharismatic” gathering:

Imagine a service that includes healing testimonies and prayers of confession, psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, baptism in water and baptism in the Spirit, creeds that move the soul and rhythms that move the body. Imagine young men

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<sup>38</sup> Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 408.

<sup>39</sup> Plaster, *Ordinances*, 79.

<sup>40</sup> Plaster, *Ordinances*, 84.

seeing visions, old men dreaming dreams, sons and daughters prophesying, and all of them coming to the same Table and then going on their way rejoicing.<sup>41</sup>

Churches need not embrace the “sign-gifts” for this kind of celebration to take place. The Holy Spirit works among the church through the gathering to bring about confession of sin, singing, ministry of the Word, and reconciliation. It would not be wrong if our Communion services included people speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. It is possible to do all things decently and in order while providing church members an opportunity to testify to God’s good work in their lives.

### **Recover Footwashing**

Confusion regarding the Holy Spirit’s work in the Lord’s Supper may be the result of a one-dimensional view of the ordinance. If this ongoing New Covenant ritual takes place in a matter of moments with a piece of bread and a sip of wine, then it is logical why theologians would fight and divide over its spiritual nature. However, if the ordinance is multidimensional or comprehensive with various elements and facets, the spiritual nature may be more apparent. For example, gathering as the church in the context of a love feast allows believers to grow in their unity with one another, and practicing footwashing is another element that celebrates the ongoing work of Christ through the Holy Spirit.<sup>42</sup>

The gift of the Holy Spirit is a remarkable new covenant reality. Jesus shares that promise with the disciples in John 14-17. Jesus precedes his discussion about the nature and role of the Holy Spirit with the act of footwashing, where he tells Peter that

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<sup>41</sup> Andrew Wilson, *Spirit and the Sacrament: An Invitation to Eucharistic Worship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 13. Wilson uses his book to cast a vision for a church that simultaneously embraces all the spiritual gifts and focuses on the Lord’s Supper as well. Moore and Wilson would likely disagree on fundamental understandings of the gifts of the Spirit, yet, they may agree on the general mood or atmosphere of the church when gathered for Communion.

<sup>42</sup> Footwashing could still stand as a reasonable application of the dual nature of washing. D. A. Carson sees no place for footwashing within the Lord’s Supper, yet he writes, “Individuals who have been cleansed by Christ’s atoning work will doubtless need to have subsequent sins washed away, but the fundamental cleansing can never be repeated” D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 465.

the one who has bathed needs only to have his feet washed (John 13:10). During his exchange with Peter, Jesus says, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand” (13:8). The timing of what Jesus means by “afterward” is difficult, but it must include some aspect of the gift of the Spirit. Seeing John 13 and the footwashing episode in connection with Jesus’s comments on the work of the Spirit makes Communion far richer. Plaster sees the connection between John 13 and Jesus’s teaching on the Holy Spirit, “In view of Jesus’ statements in John 14:26 and 16:13, the future time of understanding must be associated with the illumination of the Helper, the Spirit of Truth, after His coming from the Father. Thus, the first clue that the physical act had symbolic significance emerges at the very outset.”<sup>43</sup>

Including footwashing as part of the Communion service provides a greater opportunity to celebrate the Holy Spirit’s work of transformation through Communion. Since footwashing symbolizes sanctification and the Holy Spirit is the divine appropriator of that transformation, footwashing celebrates the Holy Spirit’s divine work. Confession of sin is an ongoing activity for Christians and is consistent with John’s theology in 1 John 1:9.<sup>44</sup> As mentioned above, Jesus washes through regeneration and sanctification. Footwashing in the Threefold Communion service highlights the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying work as believers confess and repent of sin, reconcile to others in the congregation, and testify to his ongoing work.

### **Conclusion**

The Lord’s Supper is not an additional and inconvenient element attached to a worship service. The Lord’s Supper *is* worship. Through Threefold Communion, the church engages in breathtaking acts of praise. The church worships through song,

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<sup>43</sup> Plaster, *Ordinances*, 57.

<sup>44</sup> Carson, *John*, 465. Carson even sees John 13:10 as a consistent theme that is not dissimilar to John’s point in his 1 John.

confession, examination, humble service, eating, speaking, exhortation, washing, and reconciliation. David Dockery is correct to say that the Lord's Supper is the "missing jewel of worship," and in this gathering, the church experiences his presence through his Spirit.<sup>45</sup>

The Lord's Supper is a multidimensional sign that portrays several realities and has many benefits. As we consider the Holy Spirit as the unique new covenant gift and Lord's Supper as the new covenant sign, we can see how the Communion service is a Christological sign with pneumatological power. The Spirit works in the service to sanctify believers through remembering the gospel and self-examination, and he unifies the church through this new covenant banquet. Threefold Communion deepens our understanding of this Spirit embowered multifaceted sign that Jesus gave his people to remember and proclaim his death until he comes.

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<sup>45</sup> David Dockery, foreword to Schreiner and Crawford, *The Lord's Supper*, xvii.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Communion is more significant than most believers realize, and church leaders would do well to consider whether their application best reflects their theology of the Lord's Supper. I argued in this thesis that Threefold Communion—consisting of the love feast, footwashing, and bread and cup—is the best application of the Lord's Supper in light of the biblical evidence, theological symbolism, and formational benefit. First, I explained the consistent conviction of Threefold Communion in the Charis Fellowship since its beginning in 1708. Then I traced the past, present, and future themes of Passover and Communion. In light of the multidimensional nature of the Lord's Supper, I then argued for Threefold Communion as the best application in light of the biblical evidence and theological symbolism. Finally, I demonstrated the formational benefit of the ordinance due to the Holy Spirit's work to transform and unify the church.

My greatest hope in this project is to strengthen those in the Charis Fellowship to remain committed to Threefold Communion as our comprehensive conviction of the ordinance. This thesis does not discuss application questions regarding the frequency of participation, the order of the service, or the advantages and disadvantages of practicing one element without the other two. Those decisions should be left to local church elders to decide. However, there is an expectation that Charis Fellowship pastors and churches commit themselves unashamedly to the practice. A mutual commitment to Threefold Communion will build unity without our fellowship of churches.

I also hope those outside the Charis Fellowship develop a respectful understanding of Threefold Communion. This comprehensive practice is unique compared to other applications, but similar biblical and theological convictions are the

foundation. Threefold Communion displays a greater priority for the Lord's Supper, and I believe churches will experience its beauty through the application.

Threefold Communion is a comprehensive sign for the Christian life. Through it, we look forward to the consummation of all things, celebrate current transformation, and remember and proclaim the finished work of Christ. By his grace.

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## ABSTRACT

### A COMPREHENSIVE ORDINANCE: A BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND FORMATIONAL CASE FOR THREEFOLD COMMUNION

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The night before Jesus died, the Lord presided over three important aspects in the upper room with his disciples. The Gospel accounts tell that Jesus ate a meal with the disciples, washed their feet, and shared the bread to represent his body and the cup to represent his blood. These three elements constitute the full representation of what Jesus did with his disciples and directed to their later followers. Together, their practice communicates unique spiritual truths that together form Threefold Communion.

Communion is packed with far richer spiritual truths than what is commonly thought. This project demonstrates that the practice of Threefold Communion—consisting of the love feast, footwashing, and bread and cup—is the best application of the Lord’s Supper in light of the biblical evidence, theological symbolism, and formational benefit. I maintain that Threefold Communion is the biblical, best, and most beautiful way to picture the multi-dimensionality of the triune God’s redemptive work in history, his ongoing refining work in our lives, and his promise of coming renewal and consummation. Threefold Communion gives us the best practice because it contains past, present, and future dimensions, revealing its multifaceted nature. Finally, this process is formational because the Holy Spirit is working through Threefold Communion to transform and unite the church.

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