



BLESSED
ARE THE
HUNGRY

Meditations on the Lord's Supper

Peter J. Leithart

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Το Jordan

μακάριοι οἱ πεινῶντες
νῦν ὅτι χορτασθήσεσθε

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Introduction

The Lord's Supper is the world in miniature; it has cosmic significance. Within it we find clues to the meaning of all creation and all history, to the nature of God and the nature of man, to the mystery of the world, which is Christ. It is not confined to the first day, for its power fills seven. Though the table stands at the center, its effects stretch out to the four corners of the earth.

This book is written on the assumption that the assertions in the previous paragraph are true. It is not a defense of these assertions, except in the roundabout sense captured by that axiom about proofs and puddings. It is instead a collection of more or less discrete (and somewhat repetitive) meditations on Scripture passages that shed some light on the meaning of the Supper. It is not a comprehensive book in any sense, but rather a very selective and hopefully suggestive sampling. My goal here is to gesture toward the boundaries of the Supper's significance; it is not my purpose to provide a survey map of the whole territory. With these things in mind, I imagine it would be best not to read all the essays in one sitting. The book would work best if each chapter were read individually, perhaps as preparation for communion.

Though designed as meditations, they are also intended as a small contribution to more technical discussions of sacramental theology. For centuries, theologians have

attempted to explain “what happens in holy communion” by employing philosophical concepts—derived from Aristotelian or existential-personalist or some other philosophical tradition—or, more recently, by using models from the social sciences. In many ways, these efforts (framed in what theologians call “second order discourse”) have been illuminating and have contributed to a fuller practice of the Supper. But such efforts give the illusion of moving beyond the “naive” outlook of Scripture to the more “fundamental” reality of the sacrament. I have written out of the contrary conviction that the Scriptural descriptions of the Supper are the most fundamental possible descriptions, though they may be elaborated (carefully) using extra-biblical concepts. To the question, “What happens in holy communion?” my first answer is thus not “The whole substance of the bread and wine is changed into the substance of the body and blood of Jesus”; nor “We enter into the divine present where the past event of Jesus’ death is eternally re-presented”; nor “We have a personal encounter with the risen Christ through the medium of signs”; nor “We move ritually through a liminal moment of *communitas* toward the renewal of differentiated community.” Some of these expressions are, I believe, simply wrong, but even if they were all perfectly correct, they would get us no closer to the base reality of the Supper than the variety of biblical descriptions.

What happens in holy communion? I wish to say: “We, as children of Adam, are offered the trees of the garden; as sons of Abraham, we celebrate a victory feast in the King’s Valley; as holy ones, we receive holy food; as the true Israel, we feed on the land of milk and honey; as exiles returned to Zion, we eat marrow and fat, and drink wine on the lees; we who are many are made one loaf, and commune with the body and blood of Christ; we are the bride celebrating the marriage supper of the Lamb, and we are also the bride undergoing the test of jealousy; at the Lord’s table we

commit ourselves to shun the table of demons.” This book offers no proof that a typological framework for sacramental theology is as rich and, in its way, as precise and technical as a philosophical framework, but I hope it will at least make that claim plausible. Proofs and puddings, again.

I am not avoiding defense because my assertions are indefensible. I have included a closing essay that comes closer to defending my assumptions in a rigorous way (though even that moves in a rather impressionistic direction), and I hope someday to write a more systematic theology of the sacraments. For those who find the assertions of the first paragraph striking or simply odd, however, a brief discussion would be helpful.

The claims made in the first paragraph above may be defended from two angles, one soteriological, the other eschatological. The soteriological argument is this: At the heart of our redemption is our union with Christ in His death, resurrection, and ascension. We are justified by union with Christ’s resurrection, adopted in the Son, made alive together with the One whom the Father raised from the dead, sanctified by the indwelling presence of Christ through His Spirit, made priests and kings in the Priest and King. In whatever way we wish to describe our redemption, we are describing some aspect of our union with Christ (see, further, chapter twenty-seven).

And this is precisely the soteriological meaning of the Lord’s Supper: “Is not the cup, which we bless, a communion in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread, which we break, a communion in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16). If these two things are true—that union with Christ is the fundamental reality of our salvation and that the Supper is communion with Christ—then the Supper must mean everything that union with Christ means. The Supper is a ritual sign of our justification, for in it God shows that He considers us righteous, i.e., table fellows and covenant-

keepers; it is a sign of our adoption, for we are given food by our heavenly Father; through bread and wine we are joined to the power of the risen Christ, who is present in and through His Spirit; in the Supper we are raised to heaven to feast on Christ, enthroned in heavenly places, admitted to the holy place to eat sacred bread. The significance of the Supper is as high and deep and wide as salvation itself.

Further, Jesus is the climax and recapitulation of all redemptive history. He is the victorious Seed promised outside the gates of Eden, the miracle Child of Abraham, the true Israel, the Prophet greater than Moses, the Priest after the order of Melchizedek, great David's greater Son. The whole history of Scripture is the history of Christ Jesus, and in the Supper we are inserted into this Christ and this history. Redemptive history came to a climax when the Father sent the Son who gave Himself as the bread from heaven, for the life of the world. Therefore, the meal in which we feed on Christ is the climax of salvation history. To put it yet another way, the Bible is about the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ, Head and Body. Since the body of Christ is formed as body at the table, the whole Bible is about this meal.

The eschatological argument is this: Scripture teaches that the final order of things will be the kingdom of God, and Jesus consistently described the kingdom of God as a place of feasting. Better, the kingdom is not a place where feasting occurs, but the feast itself. The trajectory of human history was set at the cross, and it has been set to this one end: That the elect may feast forever in the presence of God. At the Lord's table, we receive an initial taste of the final heavens and earth, but the Lord's Supper is not merely a *sign* of the eschatological feast, as if the two were separate feasts. Instead, the Supper is the early stage of that very feast. Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we

are displaying in history a glimpse of the end of history and anticipating in this world the order of the world to come. Our feast is not the initial form of one small part of the new creation; it is the initial form of the new creation itself. And this means that the feast that we already enjoy is as wide in scope as the feast that we will enjoy in the new creation. That is to say, it is as wide as creation itself (see, further, the closing essay).

Therefore, Lord's Supper is the world in miniature; it has cosmic significance. Within it we find clues to the meaning of all creation and all history, to the nature of God and the nature of man, to the mystery of the world, which is Christ. It is not confined to the first day, for its power fills seven. Though the table stands at the center, its effects stretch out to the four corners of the earth.

Appropriately enough, I am completing work on this book on Ascension Day, year 2000 of the reign of Jesus. My hope is that it might enable Christians to see more clearly not just the connection but the identity of the twin confession of the church: That Jesus is Lord of His table and that He is Lord of all.

Peter Leithart
Peniel Hall
Ascension Day 2000

1

Love Made Food

Then God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed, it shall be food for you.” (Gen. 1:29)

Marduk had a problem. He had been acclaimed as chief of the gods after crushing the skull of Tiamat, who was the closest thing he had to a mother. In the heavens, he had set up stations for the gods and their constellations, and formed the moon to keep track of days and months. But the gods were still not satisfied. They were hungry and demanded relief. So Marduk presented a plan to his fellow deities:

Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.
I will establish a savage, “man” shall be his name.
Verily, savage man I will create.
He shall be charged with the service of the gods
That they might be at ease.

Formed from the blood of the rebel god Kingu, Marduk made man to “establish for his fathers the great food offerings,” to bear “food-offerings . . . for their gods and goddesses.”

In the margin to E.A. Speiser's translation of this Akkadian myth, known as the *Enuma Elish*, there is a cross reference to Genesis 1:26 ("Let us make man as Our image, after Our likeness"). No doubt there are shadowy parallels between the two creation accounts, but the differences could hardly be starker, particularly regarding the role of food in the two stories. For the Akkadians, man exists to feed the gods; in the Bible, God creates man and then offers *him* food. In fact, God's gift of food is the climax of the six days of creation. Day six does not end with man's creation as the image of God or with God's command that Adam rule the earth, its oxen and its beasts. Genesis 1 ends, rather, with a menu.

The radical difference between the Creator and all idols is evident here: idols demand a *quid pro quo* and enter into the human cycle of exchange because they have needs and desires that humans can meet, whether for bread or affirmation or pleasure. Since they are creatures falsely treated as gods, idols cannot help being just as dependent as all other creatures are. Precisely because He is Creator, however, the living God needs nothing that He has made, and creatures can never offer a sufficient *quid* for His *quo*. Everything that creatures have, including our very existence, is a gift of sheer grace, an overflow of the self-giving love that is God's eternal character. Like Marduk, Yahweh ends His creative work by setting a table. Quite unlike Marduk, who wants to secure his own portion, Yahweh sets His table for man.

Food reveals not only the nature of God but the creaturely nature of God's image. Even the smallest infant knows instinctively that food is life, and the creation account shows that even unfallen Adam had to eat. But this commonsensical equation of food and life is only part of the truth. Calvin understood that Jesus was being quite

literal when He said, “Man does not live by bread alone.” How, after all, can food, which is dead, give life? Such a “resurrection” cannot be explained by any natural process but is possible only for the One who calls things that are not as though they were. Nourishment is a miracle, similar to the sacrificial miracle by which the seed must die in order to produce fruit. By its very deadness, food discloses that, beyond our dependence on food, our life is completely dependent on the Word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Adam’s menu discloses the secret of human beings in another sense as well. Influenced by Greek and Enlightenment perspectives, modern Christians assume that ideas and thoughts and other functions of reason are superior to the body and its desires. For nearly two millennia, theologians have claimed that the image of God is located primarily if not exclusively in rationality or mental capacities. In no way do I wish to minimize the wonder of the human mind, whose measureless corridors reflect the incomprehensible God. But there is nothing at all said about the brain or thinking in Genesis 1, nothing that suggests that silent contemplation is more fully human than eating a good meal. Quite the contrary: when God spoke to Adam, He did not reveal the Pythagorean theorem or teach the intricacies of superstring theory; He offered food. Adam did not come from the hand of God calculating and measuring; he came hungry.

From the beginning, then, Scripture affirms the reality and goodness of human hunger. Sin, of course, perverts our hunger, so that we seek to taste forbidden fruit rather than grasp the fruit of the tree of life, but sin does not change the fundamental realities of human desire. Our hearts follow where our treasure is; if what we value above all is in heaven, we will desire the Christ who is above, but if what

we find most desirable are earthly things, our hearts will be focused on things below. Our lives are directed by our hungers, and we find rest only when we hunger for the One who opens His hand to satisfy the desire of every living thing more than we hunger for the things in His hand.

Yet, God has put us together in such a way that our hunger for the gift of food is designed to lead us to the Giver. Adam in Paradise was not told to stand aloof from food so that he could spend his time contemplating God in Himself. Adam was offered a world to eat and was expected to enjoy God in enjoying that bounty. Adam's sin was not eating; he sinned because he ate forbidden fruit, ate disobediently, ate without acknowledging God or giving thanks, ate as if food itself would lead him into a life of wisdom. Adam sinned because he was swayed by the tempter's claim that God was selfishly refusing to share the fruits of *this* tree with Adam. Adam's sin was all bound up with his suspicion that Yahweh's table was in the end no different from Marduk's.

When our hearts are renewed by the Spirit, desire is not eliminated but rightly directed, so that our desire for fellowship leads to the eternal communion of the Trinity, our hopes for honor to the glory of God, our search for knowledge to the One who is His Wisdom, our hunger for food to the bread from heaven.

This does not mean, however, that we are to purge our "material" hungers so that we may ascend to pure "spiritual" desires, or that our "secular" wants are to be "transcended" into "sacred" ones. As the Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann wrote, with brilliant insight, "Nowhere in the Bible do we find the dichotomies which for us are the self-evident framework of all approaches to religion." Rather, "the food that man eats, the world of which he must partake in order to live, is given to him by God, and it is

given as *communion with God*. . . . All that exists is God's gift to man, and it all exists to make God known to man, to make man's life communion with God. It is divine love made food, made life for man."

As a gift of food, the Lord's Supper discloses the inner meaning of all life and especially of all human life. Here the Lord shows that He alone is the Father of lights from whom proceeds all good and perfect gifts. Here He invites us to receive life from the Incarnate Word that has proceeded from Him. Here He confirms that all our hungers are satisfied in Him. Here, above all, relishing bread and wine *is* relishing the Gift that is the Giving God.