

**At-One-Ment Accomplished and Applied:  
The Relationship Between the Atonement, the Kingdom of God, and the Eucharist**

**Abstract:** This paper seeks to fill the gap in historical modern scholarship for a clear and cogent presentation of the nature of the atonement as it relates to the kingdom of God as related to the nature of the Eucharist. The central hypothesis is that the atonement (at-one-ment) is the end of humanity's exile and estrangement not only from God, but also from one another, through Christ's atoning work in the cross and resurrection, which brings God's kingdom and covenant into the world in power. This nature of the atonement is closely related to the nature of the Eucharist as a covenant meal as the reenactment, reception, and very reality of the covenant itself. Finally, conclusion on the nature of the Eucharist as an inherently culturally-subversive, inclusive, and barrier-breaking meal in which all people are welcome to the Table to receive reconciliation with God and with one another.

**Introduction: Why another treatment on the Eucharist?**

One would think that there is not much left to write about a subject that goes back nearly two-thousand years. Has not everything that needs to be said already been said about the Eucharist? To be certain, the theology and practice of the Eucharist is rich and extremely diverse throughout the past two millennia of church history; but this richness and diversity is both a blessing and a curse for one who seeks to add anything new to the church's understanding of the nature and purpose of this sacrament: It is a blessing because there are endless amounts of writings on this topic from faithful men and women across the span of two-thousand years from which to draw amazing insights about the church's theology of the Eucharist; yet, for this very same reason, it is a unique challenge for anyone seeking to write on the Eucharist since there *is* such a diversity of thought on the subject.

For example, when one asks, "What has the church said about the Eucharist?" questions arise such as, "At what time? In which theological tradition?" and boundless others as well, not to mention the very nature of the Eucharist as divine mystery, presents an incredibly difficult task for any modern conception of the Eucharist and its continued function in the church today. However, for all its challenges, a proper understanding the Eucharist is of utmost importance for the Christian church, which is quite obvious when one considers its place within the New Testament literature itself. First, the fact that its initiation is

mentioned by all four canonical Gospels means that it very well cannot be ignored, since the Evangelists themselves thought it so important to include in each presentation of the life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah. Further, its practice was mentioned among the fundamental acts of the primordial church (Acts 2:42), along with several other things that the church still practices and finds quite important, such as adherence to the apostolic witness, prayer, fellowship, and shared communal life. Finally, and not least of which, its misuse apparently led to some peoples' sickness and death in the early church (1 Cor. 11:30), and anything that could possibly lead to sickness or death should engender our utmost attention. Not only for these objective reasons must the church carefully and passionately pursue understanding of the Eucharist, but also for its enormous benefits in and for the church itself, which our treatment below will detail at great length. So, then, what are the benefits of the Eucharist relating to how the Eucharist can achieve church unity across all kinds of barriers?

### **Theological Methodology**

To answer that question, our treatment will take an inductive approach in order to understand the relationship between the redemptive-historical acts of Jesus in his death and resurrection (hereafter referred to simply as the atonement) and the sacrament of the Eucharist. More precisely, this treatment of the Eucharist will look at what, in fact, the atonement accomplished for the reconciliation of the world and if or how the Eucharist is designed to communicate the benefits of the atonement, in particular the reconciliation of humanity in Christ. While our present treatment does not presume to be an exhaustive treatment of the atonement in particular, one must have at least a broad understanding on what the atonement is if one is even to remotely understand what Jesus meant when he said, "This is my body... this is my blood of the covenant, which was shed for many for the forgiveness of sins," (Matt. 26:28, NIV), or what St. Paul meant when he said that when one takes the Eucharist in an improper manner, one is "sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:27).<sup>1</sup> In other words, if—as we will come to see—the nature of the Eucharist is inextricably caught up in the meaning of the atonement so that any understanding of the Eucharist must first deal with the fundamental meaning of the atonement to effectively understand its relationship to the sacrament which somehow "proclaims" the atonement itself (1 Cor. 11:26, NIV).<sup>2</sup> This relationship will be expounded upon further, but with at least a general assumption that the meaning of the atonement and

---

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references are from the New International Version (NIV), unless stated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> We will explore the implications of this key passage in 1 Corinthians 11 later in this treatment.

Eucharist are tied together, let us now establish a firm understanding of what the atonement actually is and what it did for the restoration of humanity.

## **The Atonement: The Kingdom of God and the Reconciliation of Humanity**

### The Objective Nature of the Atonement

Before we consider the subjective implications of the atonement in the Eucharist, any discussion of the atonement must first and foremost focus on the objective nature of the accomplishment of Christ, which is a fixed, historical reality. This is a question of what, precisely, God accomplished through Jesus' redemptive acts on the cross and resurrection. Simply enough, the very etymology of the word *atonement* itself provides us a decisively indicative clue as to what the thing itself really is— at-one-ment—the bringing back together of God and man, and as we will see, man and one another, a distinction so crucial to the understanding of what the Eucharist does in and for the church. This interpretation of atonement is not an exclusively New Testament invention, but is seen in light of the Old Testament ritual sacrifices, which were given “to make an *at-one-ment* for him who had been alienated and separated.”<sup>3</sup> Again, Vincent makes the connection between the etymological roots of reconciliation and atonement, writing, “*at-one-ment*, the making two estranged parties *at one*” was the purpose of the sacrifices in the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> This is the objective reality of the cross, upon which hung the “lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29); namely, that in and through the death of Jesus, atonement was provided for humanity. Or, as Paul says in 2 Cor. 5:19 when expounding upon the meaning of the death of Jesus, that in Christ, “God was reconciling the world to himself.” What this actually means, however, is a totally different story.

Since our present treatment is primarily concerned with analyzing the nature of the atonement in an objective sense in order to see how it relates to the Eucharist and what that sacrament does for us, when one attempts to deconstruct any theological theme like the atonement, which is as close to the heart of the Christian faith as one can get, we must be wary of in our “re-expressing [of] it,” one author notes of looking at the benefits of the atonement, to speak of the heart of the matter “without losing the atonement’s objective side (what it means for God), as well as the subjective side (the need to win man back to

---

<sup>3</sup> John Peter Lange, Philip Schaff, and Frederic Gardiner, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Leviticus* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 115.

<sup>4</sup> Marvin Richardson Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887), 62.

God).”<sup>5</sup> In other words, we do have to ask what the atonement is; but to be clear, this is not a simple question to answer, both considering the wide array of perspectives on the atonement in the biblical narrative itself, particularly within the New Testament, as well as the wide array of commentary throughout the history of the church.

So, then, how can one simplify what is of such infinite value as the death of the Son of the Living God without in some way diminishing it or glossing over what should be prominent—majoring in the minors or even minoring in the majors? It seems, then that we could perhaps avoid this conundrum by asking, “What is the heart of the atonement?” Instead of attempting to comment on all of the various ways in which the New Testament portrays the nature of Christ’s work on the cross and resurrection, we will consider the heart of the New Testament’s teaching on the atonement, around which all other perspectives revolve.

### The Atonement and the Kingdom of God

With that in mind, both in light of the trajectory of the Gospels themselves, as well as the apostolic witness, the heart of the atonement is profoundly and pervasively about the kingdom of God. It seems important to note that the former aspect—the fact that the Gospels themselves provide the primary source information on the atonement itself—is something that has been extremely overlooked within much of the church’s musings on the atonement. We have looked to passages like Romans 3, Galatians 2, and the myriad of other especially Pauline passages to stand by themselves in order to provide the church a firm foundation of what the atonement is. Not to say that Jesus and Paul present two different visions for Christianity, as the old liberal theologians used to assert, but that the narrative of the four canonical Gospels themselves actually do provide a compelling narrative context for what the death and resurrection of Jesus accomplished within history.

To this point, one commentary on Mark’s Gospel refer to the Gospels themselves as “passion narratives with extended introductions,” he says, not to diminish the large portions of the Gospels which deal with the life and teaching of Jesus, but to highlight the importance of realizing that the main narrative and theological thrust of the Gospels lead us to read the entire stories themselves in light of the atonement.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Matthew’s mission statement in 1:21 (σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν), and it’s consequent

---

<sup>5</sup> John Goldingay, “Expounding the New Testament,” in *New Testament Interpretation : Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. Marshall Howard I. (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 1977), 358–359.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Bolt, *New Studies in Biblical Theology*, vol. 18, *The Cross from a Distance: Atonement in Mark's Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 13.

fulfillment in 26:28 present the forgiveness of sins as the bookends of sorts, which serves to frame the entire narrative of the Gospel story around the forgiveness of sins which would take place at the cross. In his comments on the kingdom of God and its role in the narrative of Matthew's Gospel, Powell writes, "[T]he plot of Matthew's Gospel describes how this [kingdom] purpose came to be fulfilled, to some extent in Jesus' ministry, but, ultimately, only in his death."<sup>7</sup> So, in order to understand the Gospels, we must understand them as narrative theology, leading us to see the whole life and ministry of Jesus, but particularly his death and resurrection (the atonement), in light of the coming of the kingdom of God

If this is the case, and it certainly is, that the Gospels themselves provide the foundational insight and context of the atonement, then we must place the context of the atonement squarely within the context of the kingdom of God. In other words, if the Gospels themselves provide sufficient context and meaning for the atonement, and if the Gospels are profoundly centered around the notion of the kingdom of God, then the atonement itself is profoundly centered around the kingdom of God.

To put it another way, we Christians tend to condense the gospel, or good news of Christianity, in such a way that the good news is that Jesus has forgiven our sins; and to be clear, this is not necessarily false. But it is terribly, terribly anemic. What if the Gospels themselves tell us the good news of what Jesus accomplished, but that the very good news of what Jesus accomplished is more deep and wide than the mere forgiveness of personal sins, but is the good news of the kingdom of God—a reality brought about chiefly by Jesus death and resurrection? To be sure, all of the Gospels, especially the Synoptic Gospels, begin by placing the good news in the context of the kingdom of God. For example, in the very opening verses of Mark's Gospel, Mark announces the "good news about Jesus the Messiah" (1:1), the good news that Jesus announces when he announces that "the kingdom of God is near" (1:13). In Mark's mind, the good news of Jesus is, in fact, the good news of the kingdom of God. But if the good news is that Jesus is the coming of the kingdom of God into the world—a wonderfully joyous thing—why, then, do each of the gospels race toward and climax with the suffering and death of Jesus?

To this point, in *Jesus and the Gospels*, Blomberg asserts that the "authentic message [of the Gospels] centers on the kingdom of God," which Blomberg defines as that "in-breaking of God into history to realize his redemptive purposes" through the death and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> For Blomberg, then, the impetus of the Gospels center on the kingdom of God,

---

<sup>7</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *The New Testament Today* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 196.

<sup>8</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd Edition. (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), 448.

which itself is the very promised entrance of God into our world through Jesus *to bring about God's restorative and redemptive purpose for his world*—a new world reality that was promised in the Hebrew Bible and hoped for and eagerly awaited by Jews in the intertestamental period and the during the time of Jesus' ministry. In other words, the kingdom of God has a pervasively redemptive and restorative nature and is the fulfillment of the very trajectory of the Old Testament Scriptures. This must also be what St. Paul meant when he says that “Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the Scriptures*” (1 Cor. 15:3). N.T. Wright points out that, contrary to how we typically view it, this short little verse does not mean that Jesus death fulfills certain go-to proof texts. No, it means that his death is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament Scriptures had to say, particularly what they had to say about the coming of the kingdom of God. The phrase “κατὰ τὰς γραφάς,” translated as “according to the Scriptures” carries with it the notion of fulfillment of a trajectory, not simply the fulfillment of proof-texts. Wright says of the aforementioned text and the phrase ‘in accordance with the Scriptures’ that “[t]he larger context of 1 Corinthians 15 makes it clear that the achievement of the cross, ‘dying for our sins in accordance with the Bible,’ was to be seen as the kingdom-establishing event...”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, speaking in respect to the same passage, Lad writes of the atoning death of Jesus spoken of in 1 Corinthians 15, “he brought into history such a manifestation of the powers of the Kingdom of God that its future, glorious consummation was guaranteed.”<sup>10</sup> Again, Thiselton writes on the same, that the cross finds its meaning “with the history of the saving purposes of God as revealed in the Old Testament, which find [its] climax and fulfillment in the saving work of Christ . . .” and that we must find the “meaning of the saving role of the death of Christ by means of interpretation in OT categories—for example, of sacrifice . . . atonement . . . sufferings . . . the good time to come.”<sup>11</sup> Further, Peter roots the crucifixion of the Messiah in the “definite plan and foreknowledge of God” in his Pentecost sermon, which further places the events of the atonement in the larger kingdom narrative. So, then, in light of both the Gospel witness, as well as the early apostolic formulations of the gospel, the death of Jesus is seen in terms of its fulfillment of the coming kingdom of God.

### The Kingdom God in the Old Testament

Now that we have established that the Gospels are all about the kingdom of God, and that the kingdom of God is God's powerful in-breaking into space and time to accomplish his

---

<sup>9</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016), 230.

<sup>10</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Donald A. Hagner, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 182.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1190.

saving purposes for humanity, it seems necessary to actually detail what the kingdom of God actually is. By nature, the kingdom of God is a promised reality—a reality rooted in the narrative of the Old Testament itself. Commenting on Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God, he notes that Jesus’ proclamation has the sense of expectation. He writes, “The idea of God’s kingship is basic in the Old Testament, even though the phrase ‘the Kingdom of God’ itself is not found there . . .” insofar that “[w]hen Jesus declares that the Kingdom of God has drawn near, therefore, he is speaking within the context of this expectation.”<sup>12</sup> It, then, is a reality not of a place, but of a power—the power of God to enter history and put the world to rights that was promised all throughout the Old Testament literature.

As we have seen so far, the kingdom of God is this new world reality, a reality where God breaks into history to achieve his redemptive purpose for humanity. However, what is not so clear thus far is what exactly that purpose entails, or how it affects our understanding of the atonement or even the nature of the Eucharist. To that end, there are a great number of places one could look in the Old Testament for the kingdom of God, not only in specific verses and passages, and also in the individual narrative and perhaps even the entire narrative of the Old Testament itself, yet since Jesus specifically located his death in relation to the so-called “new covenant,” perhaps it would be helpful to look at the places in the Old Testament where this new covenant is specifically mentioned.

*The Kingdom of God and the Forgiveness of Sins.* Since the author of Hebrews specifically cites Jeremiah 31:31-34 when he writes of the New Covenant provided through Jesus’s death, perhaps we should look to that passage for some clues as to what the kingdom of God entails. In this passage, God promises a new covenant to his exiled people, one in which God would forgive and no longer remember the sins of those who had formerly turned away from him and his covenant, that they would now have God’s law (to love God and love others) on their hearts, and that we would all know God. It is utterly crucial to understand the context of this passage being in the midst of a people exiled by God for their idolatry and sin—hence, God mentions their having turned away in the first place. Foundationally, the new covenant and the kingdom of God is about forgiveness of sins, since the foundational problem of humanity is, in fact, sin and idolatry. Thus, the new covenant, this new reality of God’s redemptive action in history, is enacted by Christ’s blood (since the spilling of blood is the prevailing means through which covenants were ratified in the ancient Near East, a framework within which the Old Testament is situated).

---

<sup>12</sup> Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 1991), 55.

On this note, Calvin says, “God’s covenant is established with us, because we have been once reconciled by the death of Christ.”<sup>13</sup> The new covenant established by Christ foundationally deals with the issue of sin. But how?

Again, N.T. Wright is magnificently helpful to understand how the first Christians, who were intimately familiar with the Jewish nature of the Christian faith, would have understood the forgiveness of sins. Contrary to the horrendous misrepresentation of the theory of penal substitution that God somehow placed his active wrath on Jesus in order to now forgive humans (which Wright proves to be a pagan intrusion in the biblical schema), the “forgiveness of sins” meant, really, the end of exile and estrangement from God. He says

Second, however, a great many Jews in the first century sharpened their hope for a fresh act of divine liberation in the light of Daniel and similar [prophetic] writings. Here they found assurance that the “exile” had not consisted merely of the 70 years in Babylon, but was continuing to their day in a different form, that of continuing pagan oppression. All the great prophets of the exile had insisted that this real disaster . . . was the result of Israel’s own idolatry and sin. If and when, therefore, a fresh act of deliverance were to undo this long cycle, it would be a divine act of “forgiveness of sins.”<sup>14</sup>

He describes this reality in the shorthand of “putting the world to rights,” which is a world in which the ‘rightness’ of being out of a state of estrangement and exile with God would be over. Jesus, in dying the death of an exile outside the city (Heb. 13:12), taking our exile upon himself in order to show that God was inviting us out of exile and into a place of liberation and restoration with himself. This, then, is the world-put-to-rights reality of the forgiveness of sins, a liberating, reconciling forgiveness, enacted by the death of Christ, which was the shedding of blood required to initiate a covenant.

### *The Kingdom of God and the Peace of Humanity.*

But this is only half of the story. God would not settle to stop with the forgiveness of sins and end our exile and estrangement. Because our only issue in our fallen state as humans is not merely estrangement from God, but also estrangement from one another as a result of sin, God promised something else also—the peoples’ liberation from exile and

---

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin and Thomas Myers, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Daniel*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 225.

<sup>14</sup> *The Day the Revolution Began*, 64.



estrangement from ourselves, and the end of separation, violence, and animosity toward our fellow humans. This aspect of the new covenant and kingdom of God is seen in several places, beginning from Adam and Eve's marital estrangement of passing blame, to Cain's murder of Abel, the destruction and violence wrought by Cain's own line of descendants, the Babel episode in which God scatters the peoples of the earth, as well as the countless injustices wrought by God's people toward themselves and foreigners as well. For, it would make no sense to call Christ's death a "reconciliation of the world" if all of the issues which needed reconciliation were not reconciled, not only the at-one-ment of God and man, but also man to our fellow humans as well.

Take, for example, Jeremiah 34:15-16, in which God tells Jeremiah

*Recently you repented and did what is right in my sight: Each of you proclaimed freedom to your own people. You even made a covenant before me in the house that bears my Name. But now you have turned around and profaned my name; each of you has taken back the male and female slaves you had set free to go where they wished. You have forced them to become your slaves again.*

Apparently, in God's mind, the promised deliverance brings with it the necessity to be so reconciled with our fellow humans that we no longer regard them as we did in the past, but instead view them as recipients of God's liberation and forgiveness as well. Again, in Jeremiah 50, God says that he will reconcile both Israel and Judah, two nations separated by the divided kingdom (vv. 4-5). Similarly, while not expressly mentioning the term 'new covenant' or 'kingdom of God,' Isaiah mentions the day when the Root of Jesse will bring peace to God's people. When mentioning how this Messiah will deal justly with God's people, especially the poor, marginalized, and needy among the people, in the very same thought Isaiah gives vivid imagery of extremely paradoxical images of what this peace will look like: Wolves will lay with lambs, calves and lions will be led by a child, cows will feed with bears, and infants play near a cobra's den (11:6-8). This will be a world where what used to harm one another would be restored to a state of *shalom*, that original, peaceful state of being in total peace, non-violence, and charity with one another. Any attempt to over-spiritualize this notion is destroyed by the conclusion of this beautiful passage when Isaiah seems to summarize his vivid poetry in concrete terms, saying, "They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (vv. 9). Evidently, this having God's law written on the hearts of God's people—a law which requires us to not only love God, but to love others also— and the fact that we have the knowledge of God has massive societal

implications as well. It necessitates a situation of harmony, peace, and concord between human beings, who have had their estrangement and exile ended by the one through whom “all the nations of the world will be blessed” (Gen. 18:18).

Not only will there be an active cessation of hostility, it will be a new age of radical inclusion of all people into God’s covenant family, regardless of any previous barriers. When speaking of this new covenant and kingdom of God, world-put-to-rights reality, Ezekiel writes, “My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be My people. Then the nations will know that I the LORD sanctify Israel” (v. 28). This is why St. Paul can write in Ephesians 2:19, after describing in great detail how the blood of Jesus not only forgives their sins, but reconciles both Jew and Gentile—two groups who were hostile toward one another and separated by the law— “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household.” Here, Calvin assesses thus, “But now, the apostle says, the enmity is removed, and the wall is broken down. By extending the privilege of adoption beyond the limits of Judea, Christ has now made us all to be brethren,” which he sees as a direct fulfillment of the new covenant promises of the future oneness of humanity in Christ.<sup>15</sup> Again, Calvin, commenting on Galatians 3:28, in which Paul says that we are all “one in Christ Jesus” despite former racial, economic, or any other barriers, “The meaning is, that there is no distinction of persons here . . . And why? Because Christ makes them all one. Whatever may have been their former differences, Christ alone is able to unite them all.”<sup>16</sup> It is clear, then, that the atonement found in Christ is sufficient not only to forgive sins, but to reconcile humanity into one family by removing the dividing lines between us.

#### Conclusion: At-One-Ment Accomplished

Thus, the cross and the new covenant, kingdom of God, world-put-to-rights reality it brings is a reality of the cessation of the world’s exile and estrangement—not only from God but also from ourselves. As we have seen, the atonement is the at-one-ment of God and humankind, as well as the at-one-ment of all humankind into one, renovated and restored family of God through the reconciliation Christ provides. This is what Paul meant when he said that Jesus died “in accordance with the Scriptures,” that the entire thrust of the Old Testament was leading toward the liberation of God’s people from estrangement and exile with God and with themselves.

---

<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 237.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

## **The Eucharist: At-One-Ment Applied he Fellowship Meal Between God *All* Those He Redeemed**

### Understanding the Eucharist in Light of the Atonement

This putting the world to rights reality of the kingdom of God is crucial to understanding the kingdom of God, the atonement itself, and, consequently, the meaning and power of the Eucharist. As we mentioned in the introduction, any understanding of the Eucharist must be firmly rooted in a solid understanding of what the atonement actually accomplished, which we have now went to great lengths to expound upon. One must have a firm grasp upon what the death of Jesus accomplished before one can understand what is meant by “this is my body . . . this is my blood,” which is a “participation in the blood of Christ . . . and . . . body of Christ,” (1 Cor. 10:16), insofar that all who take it in an unworthy manner are “sinning against the body and blood of our Lord” (11:27). In short, again, we went to great lengths to expound upon the nature of the atonement because of its integral connection to the Eucharist itself.

### Retaining the Mystery of the Eucharist

So, then, what is the meaning of the Eucharist, and why does it matter for the inclusion of all at the Table, and why do we posit that this radical inclusion has led to the radically welcoming culture within the Episcopal Church? At present, we will not go to great lengths to engage or debate with the various streams of thought within the church in relation to the presence of Christ in respect to Roman Catholic transubstantiation, Lutheran consubstantiation, the Reformed spiritual presence view, or Zwinglian memorialism. It is not that these discussions are in any way marginal or irrelevant; however, our present concern is with how the Eucharist relates to the atonement, if or how it actually communicates the benefits of it to us, and why that matters for an open Table and the kind of culture that creates in the church. In other words, we will not debate what “is” is. We will simply agree with Jesus that it is. We will allow mystery to be mystery, and simply speak where the Bible speaks.

### Covenantal Backdrop: How do covenantal meals function in the biblical narrative

Before we move into the crucial New Testament texts regarding the Eucharist’s meaning and function within the church, we would be anemic in our treatment if we ignored the little-known theme of covenant meals throughout the biblical narrative. At various times throughout the Scriptural narrative, when God invites humans into a covenant relationship with himself, he almost always gave them a covenant meal by which to commemorate and

celebrate the newfound relationship with the Divine presence. For example, Adam and Eve are given the food of the garden in which they walked with God; after the flood, God gave Noah and his descendants meat to eat; Abraham eats with God and his men when he learns of God's covenant to him and his descendants; God gives the Israelites the Passover meal to commemorate their liberation from Egypt; Moses and the elders of Israel are invited to dine with God on the mountain; David eats the bread of the presence in the Temple; and, finally, Jesus gives his disciples a meal to eat in perpetuity to commemorate and celebrate the new covenant which he was providing them. These instances of God giving his covenant people a covenant meal says something that is invariably true about the human experience, namely, that eating and drinking together "can in fact be a metaphor for consummation or initiation of a relationship," which Bramer notes can symbolize both fellowship between God and man, as well as the covenant community at large.<sup>17</sup> When we eat and drink with someone, we say that we are one with them, that we are at rights with them, that they are welcome in our presence, and that we are in a state of mutual peace. This is not only what God tells us when we dine with him, but what we tell each other when we partake of the Eucharist together.

Communion in Corinth: How did Paul present the meaning of the Eucharist?

With that in mind, we will now finally consider the nature of the Eucharist and how the Eucharist communicates the benefits of the atonement to us, however mysteriously it may very well be. The aforementioned Pauline text in 1 Corinthians 10-11 is of chief importance to our understanding of the Eucharist. While discussing the squabbles and relational issues within the Corinthian church, St. Paul addresses how the Corinthians were misusing the Lord's Supper, reminding them of the implications this covenant meal has for the life of the church. It is within these passages that we see three primary perspectives on the Eucharist: 1) the Eucharist is the *reenactment* of the atonement; 2) the Eucharist is the *reception* of the atonement; and 3) the Eucharist is the *realization* of the atonement. Let us now look at each of these aspects of how the Eucharist relates to the atonement.

Visible Words: Proclaiming At-One-Ment Together

First, Paul tells the Corinthians that the Eucharist speaks volumes. It is the reenactment of the atonement. He writes, "For whenever you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you proclaim [καταγγέλλω, laud/celebrate] the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). His use of καταγγέλλω is interesting in that it is almost always used to describe *proclaiming*

---

<sup>17</sup> Stephen J. Bramer, "Drink," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, electronic ed., Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 187.

things.<sup>18</sup> So, how, then can an act proclaim, or celebrate, something? The evidence within the text itself and within the historical witness is unclear. Does the Apostle have in mind certain words that are to be said that specifically preach about the atonement? Or is it that he thinks that doing it in remembrance of the Lord leads the partakers to specifically remember the original institution of the Supper among the disciples by the Lord himself who was with them? In any case, we agree with Lenski when he says

There is no need to quibble about this proclaiming and to state that it means a special proclamation in words of our own. Every proper celebration of the Lord's Supper is a proclamation of the Lord's death. The words of the institution alone, when they are spoken over the bread and the cup, do not proclaim that Christ died for us; the entire action of the sacrament does that, especially our receiving his body and his blood given and shed for us. For the entire sacrament is based on the death of the Lord.<sup>19</sup>

As Lenski writes, the whole entirety of the sacrament itself is a proclamation and celebration. It proclaims in that it is visible words, as the Reformers were keen to describe the sacraments. In any sense, the Eucharist proclaims God's promise to be our God and us his people, that we are forgiven through the death and resurrection of Christ, that we are one with those who partake of the same bread and wine as us—people with whom we were formerly estranged—and that we are awaiting that heavenly banquet when Christ returns. It is vital to remark that we not only say something about Calvary in general, or our own salvation through the atonement provided at Calvary, but in the Eucharist we also say something about our own brothers and sisters and our own reconciliation with them as well. When speaking of the fact that Jesus died to reconcile “all mankind” that the “Church was always saying it [that Jesus died to reconcile humankind to itself] in the perpetual commemoration of Calvary, in her Holy Eucharist.”<sup>20</sup> This statement is consistent with the entire early Christian witness to the nature of the Eucharist as indicative of a horizontal reality of intrapersonal reconciliation provided through the death of Jesus. In sum, the Eucharist proclaims volumes about the nature of the at-one-ment: It proclaims that we are at one with God, no longer exiles and strangers, but invited into the covenant family of God; and it proclaims that we are at one with one another, no longer strangers, but brothers and sisters in the covenant family of God.

---

<sup>18</sup> For example, the early Christian proclamation of Jesus throughout Acts (3:24; 4:2; 13:5; etc.).

<sup>19</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), 474.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., *Fathers of the Third Century: Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius the Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius and Minor Writers, Methodius, Arnobius*, vol. 6, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 543.

## Communion Together: Receiving At-One-Ment Together

It is this point that we can say that the Eucharist is not only a memorial, yet is mysteriously the actual reception of the benefits of the atonement with all who faithfully and properly commune. When we are told by Jesus and Paul to partake of the Eucharist “in remembrance” of Jesus’ redemptive acts, this ἀνάμνησις is not a mere recollection of historical facts, yet it is certainly not any less than that. Commentators note that ἀνάμνησις can both refer to our own remembrance, but also God’s remembrance.<sup>21</sup> Both options seem interesting to say the least, and could fit into any cogent understanding of the Eucharist. However, considering the very nature of the Eucharist as a covenant meal, as well as fitting within the larger narrative of the kingdom of God as the entrance of God into history to bring liberation from exile and estrangement, this “remembrance” places the meal squarely within the narrative context of the Passover and Exodus, and the atonement as New Passover and New Exodus. In this sense, “to ‘remember’ the saving facts of religion means to the ancient world that these facts are tangibly experienced” in such a way that those saving acts of the past are “made contemporary with the fundamental act of salvation.”<sup>22</sup> This is the same kind of remembrance in view when the apostles tell Paul to “remember” the poor in Galatians 2:10. Surely they did not mean to simply recall the poor in some theoretical sense, like remembering a wonderful memory. No, this remembrance is a calling to mind *in order to drive one to action*, a “a reason for acting.”<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, in this sense, both God’s remembrance and our remembrance are likely both to be in view in that when we partake of the covenant meal, we remember our own reconciliation provided by Christ’s atoning sacrifice; yet, as a covenant meal, we implore God to remember his covenant promise to redeem, reconcile, and restore us to him and those taking the meal alongside us. In other words, the remembrance is a memorial which serves to remind ourselves of the benefits of atonement, as well as to ‘remind’ God to remember to bless us with those very same benefits. Similarly, in 1 Cor. 10, St. Paul warns the Corinthians from idolatry by reminding them that the Eucharistic meal is a “sharing [κοινωνία, participation/communion]” in the body and blood of Christ (v. 16). In Paul’s mind, it is abhorrent for believers to share in the cup of idols and then sharing in the cup of Christ because those who seek to sacrifice to idols seek to get the benefits they promise,

---

<sup>21</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 805.

<sup>22</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 879.

<sup>23</sup> Ceslas Spicq and James D. Ernest, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 491.

as St. Chrysostom remarked on the Corinthian issue as Christians “blessing God for delivering [us] from idols, yet running again to their tables” to receive the presence and blessing of those very same idols.<sup>24</sup>

But, if he contrasts the table of idols and the table of Christ, the “Supper entails participation in the blood and body of Christ, that the single loaf speaks to the heart of the unity that must mark the life of the church, and that the meal serves to renew the exclusive covenant with God established through Christ, and that its abuse constitutes a foolish and dangerous challenge to the God who is present in its celebration.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, the Supper is the sharing and participation of the blessing of the atonement provided through Christ. Calvin is yet again helpful here. Writing on the nature of the sacraments, he says that by their faithful reception, the sacraments actually “present, both to good and to bad men, the grace of God . . .” insofar that “[b]elievers receive what is offered” and signified.<sup>26</sup> Since, then, the Eucharist is the covenant meal of the new covenant promise of restoration to God and each other, then the believing participants, in Calvin’s mind, actually do partake of those very same blessings. Boxall’s commentary on Revelation calls the Eucharist the “theatre of reception” of the benefits of the death of the lamb of God who was “slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8).<sup>27</sup> But, in view is not only the blessing of forgiveness of God and liberation from estrangement from him, but also reunion and reconciliation with those with whom we also partake to the left and the right of ourselves, as Ignatius of Antioch once wrote,

Take ye heed, then, to have but one Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup to [show forth] the unity of His blood . . . For there is one flesh of the Lord Jesus Christ; and His blood which was shed for us is one; one loaf also is broken to all [the communicants], and one cup is

---

<sup>24</sup> John Chrysostom, *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Hubert Kestell Cornish, John Medley, and Talbot B. Chambers, vol. 12, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 139.

<sup>25</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 469.

<sup>26</sup> John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 111.

<sup>27</sup> Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2006), 191.

distributed among them all. . . [Therefore] perform all things with harmony in Christ.<sup>28</sup>

In the early Christian mind, the atonement not only unites us to God, but also to others, in such a way that the covenant meal which points to that reality is meant to be a very real obtaining of that very same unity accomplished by the death of Christ.

### The Promised Reality: The Kingdom of God at the Table of God

Finally, we posit that the Eucharist is not only the reenactment and reception of the atonement, it is a very real expression and foretaste of its very promised reality—a world put to rights in which humans are restored to God and to one another. The atonement is the bringing together of heaven and earth through the exile-ending, sin-cancelling death of Jesus, the restoration of God and man and man with one another; the Eucharist is the fullest expression of that world-shattering reality. In it, we proclaim and participate in the forgiveness and freedom we freely receive by faith. We proclaim and participate in the fact that the Lord will come again, a time in which we will sit with all the redeemed of God from every tribe, tongue, nation, and people at the wedding banquet of God (Rev. 7:9; Rev. 19:19). This reality of men and women from across all social, economic, and any other boundary, keeling at the same table drinking from the same cup and eating from the same bread, throwing themselves upon the one who died for them, eagerly awaiting his triumphal return to dine with us forever, *is the very reason* for which Christ died, as we detailed at great length above.

The Eucharist, then, is the very reality to for which Christ died: Forgiven human beings from all walks of life— all races, genders, socio-economic backgrounds and boundaries, sexual identities and sexual orientations, theological convictions—gathered at one Table to partake in the blessing and benefits of God with us. In this sense, the Eucharist is the very tangible realization of the atonement here and now in our churches and communities; and this was always the understanding of how the Eucharist functions in the church. Speaking further on the Eucharist, Arnobius writes, “The expiatory sacrifice, the voluntary Victim, *the profound design of God the Father*, are all here. But the infinite value of the sacrifice was unfolded when the Son of man was identified by the poor Gentile centurion:

---

<sup>28</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, “The Epistle of Ignatius to the Philadelphians,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 81.



‘Truly this was the Son of God.’”<sup>29</sup> For the early church fathers, this “profound design” was that those who were formerly excluded, like the Gentile centurion, and those from whom we were formerly estranged being invited to the same Table as us is the very reality of the atonement made real among us as we receive it together. It is a very real way that we can show the world the love Christ said would show the world we are his disciples, that we can lay down all hostility, strife, division, and prejudice and dine with Jesus and be blessed by him together.

### **Radical Inclusion, Radical Welcome: Inviting *All* to Christ’s Table**

In conclusion, it is for this reason that the Apostle speaks in such harsh terms when speaking about the violations of the Table. Yet, it is interesting that he says that the way in which we partake of the Eucharist in an unworthy manner is not only through our own unrepentant sin and idolatry (as we mentioned before), but also in that we do it with division, selfishness, and intolerance among us. In the same breath that he warns against idolatry, he also reminds the Corinthian church that they are to be unified as they take the Eucharist, just as they take from one loaf of bread (1 Cor. 10:17). Further, he details the divisions among the church (11:18), the fact that some were purposefully excluding other believers and having “private suppers” (v. 21), and that some were being denied the Eucharist due to others’ selfishness (v. 21b). It is utterly essential to the Supper that we be completely open, inclusive, unselfish, and unified, or we face the same peril described by the Apostle Paul. As a sacramental, reconciliatory meal which invites all people across all barriers, this meal serves as a culturally-subversive act which tells of and calls the entire world to the restoration, peace, and unity found only in Christ’s atoning work.

---

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., *Fathers of the Third Century: Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius the Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius and Minor Writers, Methodius, Arnobius*, vol. 6, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 543, emphasis mine.

## Sources

- Antioch, Ignatius of. "The Epistle of Ignatius to the Philadelphians," in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.
- Blomberg, Craig L. *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd Edition. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009.
- Bolt, Peter. *New Studies in Biblical Theology*. Vol. 18, *The Cross from a Distance: Atonement in Mark's Gospel*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004.
- Boxall, Ian. *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary. London: Continuum, 2006
- Bramer, Stephen J. "Drink," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, electronic ed., Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996.
- Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010.
- . *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010.
- . *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Daniel*, vol. 2. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010.
- Chrysostom, John. *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, ed. Ciampa, Roy E. and Rosner, Brian S. *The First Letter to the Corinthians*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010.
- Goldingay, John. "Expounding the New Testament," in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. Marshall Howard I. Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 1977.
- Hooker, Morna D. *The Gospel according to Saint Mark*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 1991.
- Ladd, George Eldon. *A Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Donald A. Hagner, Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993.
- Lange, John Peter, Schaff, Philip, and Gardiner, Frederic. *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Leviticus*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008.
- Marshall, I. Howard. *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary. Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000.
- Lenski, R. C. H. *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963.
- Philip Schaff, trans. Hubert Kestell Cornish, John Medley, and Talbot B. Chambers, vol. 12, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series. New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889.
- Powell, Mark Allan. *The New Testament Today*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999.
- Roberts, Alexander, Donaldson, James, and Coxe, A. Cleveland eds., *Fathers of the Third Century: Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius the Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius and Minor Writers, Methodius, Arnobius*, vol. 6, The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886.
- Spicq, Ceslas and Ernest, James D. *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994
- Vincent, Marvin Richardson. *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 3. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887.
- Wright, N.T. *The Day the Revolution Began*. New York: Harper Collins, 2016.