

Experiencing the Fullness of Our Union with Christ at the Lord's Table

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Although there are many doctrinal and historical controversies that swirl about the sacrament of the Lord's Table, and which we might be expected to address when dealing with our experience of fullness of our union with Christ in the sacrament, I wish here to leave those topics to the systematic and historical theologians. Instead, let us turn to focus on a single, biblical theme that has its beginnings in the Old Testament, and comes to fruition in the Lord's Table. That theme, highlighted in 2 Samuel 9, will indeed help us to experience the fullness of our union with Christ in the sacrament. It is the theme of being graciously invited to sit at a king's table, under his mercy and protection.

There are three terms that the New Testament uses to describe the sacrament: Communion, the Lord's Supper, and the Lord's Table. These are not just mere synonyms; each term is well considered by the apostolic writers, and each term is meant to emphasize some aspect of the meaning of the sacrament. Today we will consider the sacrament as it is called the Lord's Table.

This is a unique term because it does not focus on the elements of the sacrament, or even the fact that it is a meal. Instead, our attention is drawn to the table itself and the Lord's ownership of the table. The focal point of the table is built upon longstanding imagery of what a table has always symbolized, in the Old Testament, and throughout history.

First and foremost, a table is a place where a family gathers, where the closeness and intimate fellowship of a family is realized and enjoyed. Psalm 128 paints this memorable picture for us. Describing the blessings of a covenant family, it says, "Your wife will be a fruitful vine in the heart of your house, your children like olive plants around your table." If the table is a symbol of family, then the Lord's Table is certainly a symbol of our adoption as sons and daughters of the Lord. It is not too much to say that, if the table is an integral part of the sacrament, one of the things that is signified and sealed by the sacrament is our adoption into the household of God.

A table is also a place where family structure is acknowledged. Specifically, every table has a "master" in biblical terms. In our terms we talk about the "head" of the table, who is the head of the home. The head of the house is always the head and owner of the table, specifically, and this headship is usually acknowledged in some way at the table. The head of the table almost always sits in a specific seat, or is the one to say the prayer before a meal.

It is no coincidence that, as the family structure has declined in our times, families do not gather as frequently around a table. The symbolism of headship at a table is also beginning to vanish, along with the very idea of headship itself. But, this connection between headship and a table is closely united in biblical imagery, and it is, no doubt, why Paul referred to the sacrament as the "Lord's Table"—in order to emphasize the headship of Christ over His people. When we sit at the Lord's Table, we remember and proclaim not only His death, but also that He is the only king and head of the church.

Another important part of this dynamic of headship over a table is that those who sit at a man's table are under his guardianship and protection. To eat at a man's table is to be cared for by him, as if you were his own family. This is beautifully illustrated in 2 Samuel 9. The chapter begins with David asking the question, "Is there still anyone who is left of the house of Saul that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?" The word translated "kindness" is the Hebrew word *chesed*, which means "covenant faithfulness" or "grace," and is the word most often used to describe God's love for His people. David invited Mephibosheth, the lame grandson of Saul, to eat at his table for the rest of his life. This was to be David's expression of covenant faithfulness for Jonathan's sake. Then, throughout the chapter, the text repeats itself, again and again, using the imagery of a table as the symbol of David's *chesed*. In verse 7 David says, "You will eat bread at my table continually." In verse 10 David says to Ziba, "Mephibosheth will eat bread at my table always." In verse 11 David says, "As for Mephibosheth, he shall eat at my table like one of the king's sons." The text concludes by saying, in verse 13, that Mephibosheth "ate continually at the king's table." The text does not merely mean that David fed Mephibosheth. David could have done that in any number of ways. Instead, the text emphasizes David's table, and how Mephibosheth was given a seat there, which symbolized David's care, provision, and protection—his *chesed*.

All of this imagery comes to bear in a sacrament that is called the Lord's Table. We are reminded not only of His headship, but of His covenant faithfulness toward us. We are under His care and utterly dependent on what He provides—much like lame men sitting at a king's table.

In contrast, the imagery of being beneath a man's table is to be humbled before him. The Canaanite king Adoni-Bezek commented upon his defeat, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off used to gather scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me" (Judges 1:7). Another Canaanite – one more faithful – will always be remembered for saying, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master's table" (Matt. 15:27). The woman who said these words was commended for her great faith, and her daughter was healed, but she knew that even to be under the Lord's Table would be blessing enough. In the sacrament, we are graciously invited to sit at the table, not gathering scraps, but enjoying His full provision.

Another thing a table symbolizes is the solidarity of faith, whether that faith is true or false. For example, the prophets of Baal and Asherah were said to "eat at Jezebel's table," which was Elijah's way of saying that she gave her full support and allegiance to those false prophets and their false gods (1 Ki. 18:19).¹ The apostle also assumes that a table is a symbol of religious solidarity and a singular allegiance when he writes, "...you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons" (1 Cor. 10:21). We cannot have a divided mind or an equivocal faith, and we cannot serve two masters. The Lord's Table is a symbol of the unique and singular allegiance we have with Christ and His people. As Charles Spurgeon put it, table companions pledge a "mutual fidelity."²

Finally, in terms of symbolism, a table is a biblical metaphor for peace, and being able to enjoy the provision of peace. This point comes out negatively in the imprecatory prayer of Psalm 69:22—"Let their table become a snare for them, and their well-being a trap." The term translated "well-being" in the NKJV is the word *shalom*, which is well known as the Hebrew word meaning "well-being," or "peace." Notice here that "their well-being" or "their shalom" is a parallel term for "their table." Their table becoming a snare means that the wicked may only have an

¹ Interestingly, Elijah said this while talking to King Ahab, Jezebel's husband. By referencing "Jezebel's table," perhaps Elijah meant to say that Ahab had lost his headship, and therefore his table.

² Charles H. Spurgeon, *Till He Come: A Collection of Communion Addresses* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 191.

appearance of peace for a time, but their apparent peace will only turn to judgment. On the positive side, Psalm 23 beautifully pictures a furnished table as the provision of peace from the Lord. That table is said to be prepared “in the presence of my enemies” (Psalm 23:5). This helps us understand what that table symbolizes. In the presence of enemies, those who would persecute and disturb our peace, we are nonetheless provided a table, which is a symbol of the peace we have in Christ. Who reclines at a table and enjoys a meal while enemies look on? It is the same as asking: who really has peace in this tumultuous and dangerous world? Only one who believes in the Prince of Peace and rests in Him. A table is a picture of this peace, and the Lord’s Table is a regular reminder of our peace in Christ – a peace which surpasses all understanding, even in a tumultuous and dangerous world.

To summarize so far, a table is a vastly important biblical symbol. We may sometimes think of a table as just a piece of furniture with a functional purpose, but in biblical imagery, it embodies precious meaning. It is a sign of the closeness of a family and its authority structure; it is a symbol of provision, protection, and peace, under the tutelage of one head; it is also a representation of solidarity and agreement. All of this imagery comes to bear in a sacrament called “The Lord’s Table.”

There is one last element to this Old Testament imagery that we need to consider, which comes from Malachi 1:12. In that passage, the altar in the temple is referred to as “the table of the Lord,” or “the Lord’s table.” This is unique phraseology in the Old Testament, being found only in this one verse, and not a few commentators are tempted to see it as a prophetic reference to the New Testament sacrament. That is perhaps a bit much to conclude; nevertheless, it is a striking term in Malachi, and it may be the source of the term “the Lord’s table” in I Corinthians. At the very least, it reminds us that what took place on the altar of the temple would be fulfilled once and for all by Christ. Our proclamation of this fulfillment is in a sacrament called the “Lord’s Table,” so in one sense, Malachi’s term is anticipatory, if not outright prophetic. However, there must be no confusing the shadow with the substance. In the Scriptures, the altar may have been called the Lord’s Table, but the Lord’s Table is never called an altar. In the Roman Catholic Church, the piece of furniture upon which the sacramental elements sit is referred to as an altar, because the sacrament is actually seen as a re-sacrificing of Christ’s body. It is called an altar because an altar, by definition, is a place of sacrifice. This terminology, and the theology behind it, is positively wrong, even blasphemous. Hebrews 7:27 says that Christ offered up Himself once and for all, as a perfectly sufficient sacrifice, never to be repeated again. To set the bread and the cup on something called an altar is to deny the completion and perfection of Christ’s death.

The Lord’s Supper sits on a table, not an altar. An altar is a place of sacrifice, but a table is a symbol of living headship. The elements we eat symbolize His broken body and shed blood, but we sit at the table of a living Lord, who has a living and gracious headship over us. When we come to His table, what should be on our minds and hearts is His headship—the reality of it, the blessings of it, and the implications of it for our lives. We are not re-sacrificing the body of Christ at an altar; we are submitting to His headship at His table.

Following this imagery, we come now to a most important point. Every table has a head, and that head has the full prerogative to determine who will sit at his table and enjoy the blessings of his provision. Even in our experience, we know that a man has the full right to invite or not invite whomever he wants to sit at his own table. You can not invite yourself. Only the head of the table can do that. Would it not be unnerving, to say the least, if someone walked into your house and sat at your table uninvited? A table guest must be invited, if he is to be welcome.

Even a common man has the sole authority to invite whom he wants to his own table, but now imagine walking into a king’s palace and sitting at his table without an invitation. In 2 Samuel 9, it would have never entered into Mephibosheth’s mind to just appear one night at David’s table

without being invited. Even when he was invited, he could hardly believe it. Now, add the fact that we are not talking about the table of any mere human king. We are talking about the table of the King of Kings, the eternal Son of God and ruler of all nations. If we think of it that way, as we should, it is amazing how many people come to the Lord's Table without ever first asking: am I invited?

Our Savior is clear in His word about who is invited. It is those for whom He died—who, by a living and growing faith, discern the Lord's body as being broken for them, and have examined themselves for such faith, and repented of their sins, and who truly desire a growing measure of God's grace. Those are invited who are truly covered by the righteousness of Christ by faith, and who, with a humble but clear conscience before God, can say, "I trust in Christ alone." This is why Scripture issues a stern warning to examine yourself, lest you come to the Lord's Table uninvited. It is of interest to note that, when Christ instituted the Lord's Supper, He spoke of Judas this way: "The hand of my betrayer is with me on the table" (Luke 22:21). Christ could have referred to His betrayer in any number of ways, but the betrayal of Judas seemed to be so highlighted by the table, where solidarity and loyalty are supposed to be symbolized. For this reason a man is supposed to examine himself before coming to the Lord's Table—faithlessness will only be highlighted by the table, because the table is where loyalty comes to be confirmed.

It would be wrong to think that the invitation to the Lord's Table is solely discerned by the individual. The Lord's Table is a corporate sacrament. After all, a table is for a family, not an individual. The body of Christ, primarily through its elders, must exercise discernment when it comes to the Lord's Table, in order to lovingly prevent those who are yet uninvited from eating and drinking judgment upon themselves. Yet even if the elders of the church have a practical duty to fulfill by guarding the purity of the sacrament, it is important that we jealously guard the sole headship and authority of Christ that is symbolized by His table. Behind His headship at the table stands an even greater reality, which is the fact that salvation is entirely His work, and the saved are entirely of His choosing. If the Lord is sovereign over who He invites to His table, and only those who are saved by His grace are invited, then we are brought back to the fundamental point of the gospel itself—that we are saved solely by the good pleasure of a sovereign God.

While much can be gleaned by looking back at the symbolism of a table in the Old Testament, our Lord also intended for His table to be a pledge of the future state of glory. Upon instituting the sacrament, our Lord quelled a prideful dispute among the disciples with the assurance that those who continued with Him in His trials would "eat and drink at My table in My kingdom" (Luke 22:24-30). This assurance, given to His apostles while still seated at the table, would have been very striking. Christ obviously meant the Lord's Table to be an abiding assurance that we will yet sit with Him at an even greater table when His kingdom comes in its fullest. In this regard, the Lord's Table is a guarantee that His promises are true and His salvation is sure. Not only will we come into His kingdom, but we will come to His table—a place of intimate and joyous fellowship.

Given the fact that the sacrament is invested with this rich, Biblical imagery of a table, Reformed churches have historically been careful to use tables when observing communion.³ John Knox's Anglo-Genevan Psalter specifies the use of a table where every communicant may have a seat. Commenting on Knox's communion practice, Hughes Oliphant Old identifies the importance of the table's symbolism:

³ For a full treatment of this historical practice see Walter Taylor, "As They Sat at Table: Presbyterian Communion Practices," D.Min. diss. (Due West: Erskine Theological Seminary, 2012).

The table is obviously part of the sign. Every man and woman likewise takes his or her place as occasion best affords. Apparently this gathering around the table, and even sitting at the table, was regarded as a most symbolic act. It was seen as a sacramental act. It was one of those visual acts that was of the essence of the sacrament.⁴

Likewise, the *Westminster Directory for the Publick Worship of God* specifies that the communion table be “conveniently placed, that the communicants may orderly sit about it, or at it.”⁵ Consequently, Scottish “communion seasons” were known for being careful to give each person a seat at the table. Larger congregations would often have six or seven seatings at the communion table, and the services could go on for hours before everyone was served.⁶ Even with the logistical problems that inevitably arose, sitting at the Lord’s Table was seen to be as much a privilege as actually partaking of the elements. Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847) was the first in Scotland to openly promote “pew communion” for practical reasons, but the use of tables was always a historic and cherished practice in the Covenanter tradition.

Reformed churches exhibit a mixed practice today, with some still accommodating all the communicants at tables. Others are content that the symbolism of the table is preserved by placing the elements on a smaller table where the pastor officiates, while the communicants partake of the sacrament in pews. I do not intend to make a firm case for either practice. While it would be ideal to have all the communicants sitting around the Lord’s Table, the most important thing, I believe, is to purposefully incorporate a table of some kind into our communion practice, and always find comfort and joy in what that table symbolizes.

When David invited Mephibosheth to eat at his table, we do not necessarily see a prophetic precursor to the Lord’s Supper. What we do see is David, the human forefather of our Savior, an established type of Christ and the king of God’s people, extending his undeserved covenant mercy to a crippled outcast of the house of Saul, which had been rejected by God. King David could have easily ignored him, or even killed him, but he chose to love him. He could have shown his kindness to Mephibosheth in a thousand different, impersonal ways, but nothing could have demonstrated his heartfelt mercy more than to give Mephibosheth a seat at his table. David’s table represented his loving guardianship, his true fellowship, and his abundant provision. He did not just feed Mephibosheth; by inviting him to his table, he adopted him as a son.

Surely we can see a reflection here of David’s greater Son. David could only invite a lame man to his table, whereas Christ could command the lame to stand up and walk. As the greater King of God’s people, Christ extends His covenant mercy to outcast sinners who have no claim to His grace, and who suffer from the death of sin, which is a far greater malady than crippled legs. Our King and Savior also chose to impress His great mercy upon us by inviting us to His table—the Lord’s Table—which embodies His loving guardianship, His true fellowship, and His abundant provision. By inviting us to His table, Christ shows us that He is no distant benefactor; He is a loving Savior who adopts us as His own, who exercises an affectionate headship, and pledges to care for us according to our needs. This is what it means to be invited to the King’s Table.

⁴ Hughes Oliphant Old, *Holy Communion in the Piety of the Reformed Church* (Powder Springs: Tolle Lege Press, 2013), 249.

⁵ *The Westminster Directory: Being a Directory for the Publick Worship of God in the Three Kingdomes*, Ian Breward, intro. (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1980), 385.

⁶ Old, 783.

In conclusion, consider the response of Mephibosheth when he was invited to David's table: "What is your servant, that you should look upon such a dead dog as I?" (2 Sam. 9:8). Every communicant who comes to the Lord's Table should have the same dead-dog humility as Mephibosheth. To sit at the table of the King of Kings, under His loving protection and headship, is a privilege that no sinner deserves. We cannot have enough thankfulness and humility when coming to the Lord's Table. Thomas Watson said it well:

If we would come rightly prepared to the sacrament we must come with humbled hearts...Was Christ humble, who is all purity? And are we proud, who are all leprosy? Oh, let us come with a sense of our own vileness. How humble should he be who is to receive alms of free grace!⁷

⁷ Thomas Watson, *The Lord's Supper* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 50.