

The Lord's Supper — Gift and Gratitude: A Baptist's View

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Abstract

Baptist theology, at least in German-speaking countries, has usually paid little attention to the Lord's Supper. Nevertheless, the Lord's Supper plays such an important role in Holy Scripture, in church traditions, in the ecumenical dialogues of the twentieth century, and in the reality of church life, that it seems unreasonable to neglect it theologically. So, this article seeks to stimulate Baptist thinking on the Lord's Supper in the light of tradition and Scripture. The author argues that Baptists have too often sought to link themselves to Zwingli instead of Calvin. That means they have too often adopted a purely symbolic, anti-sacramental understanding of the Lord's Supper. But this understanding does not correspond to the biblical accounts of its institution. In contrast, Calvin's teaching on the Lord's Supper understands the Supper as a work of grace and of faith in one. This twofold meaning is clearly expounded in the Consensus Tigurinus of 1549 and is of great ecumenical significance today.

Keywords

Lord's Supper; Holy Communion; Reformed tradition; sacrament; remembrance; fellowship

Introduction

Until now, Baptist theology has paid only little attention to the Lord's Supper, at least in German-speaking countries,¹ though the themes of 'church' and 'baptism' have been and still are prominent. On the one hand, this is understandable, as ecclesiology and the doctrine of baptism are the areas which have determined Baptist identity from its beginnings and in which consist the greatest differences to other church traditions. Nevertheless, the Lord's Supper plays such an important role in Holy

¹ It seems to apply to the wider European context too: The *Dictionary of European Baptist Life and Thought* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster 2009), which in other respects is highly commendable, has no article with the headwords Lord's Supper or Lord's Table.

Scripture, in church traditions, in the ecumenical dialogues of the twentieth century, and in the reality of church life, that it seems unreasonable to neglect it theologically. So, this article seeks to stimulate Baptist thinking on the Lord's Supper in the light of tradition and Scripture.²

The Baptist Link to the Reformed Tradition on the Lord's Supper — in Which Sense?

For the German-speaking countries, we can begin our reflections with the work of the New Testament scholar and professor at the Hamburg Theological Seminary Wiard Popkes, *Abendmahl und Gemeinde (The Lord's Supper and the Church)*, written in 1981. Popkes's work remains the only book on this subject in the German language by a Baptist. Popkes has shown that there is no specific Baptist doctrine and practice regarding the Lord's Supper. The Baptists associated themselves to a large extent with the Reformed tradition. According to Popkes, this was a mistake, because that which is otherwise typical for Baptists, namely strong spiritual experience and emphasis on church life, was neglected at this point. It would be rewarding in many respects to discuss this thesis more extensively. I should like to restrict myself here to taking up Popkes' impulse in a particular direction, while emphasising something different. That is, I do not think that the link to the Reformed tradition is, as such, a theological weakness. The essential criterion for an adequate teaching on the Lord's Supper is not whether it is typically Baptist or not, but if it is scriptural, that is, whether it conforms to the gospel of Jesus Christ. If we follow this criterion, then we can be open as Baptists even to older theological traditions — if they are able to stand up to the test of Scripture.

The theological problem with the Baptist doctrine and practice lies, in my opinion, in the fact that the differences within the Reformed tradition between Calvin and Zwingli are usually not sufficiently

² This paper was originally written for an oral presentation at a theological conference. I thank Revd Andrew B. Duncan (Gladbeck, Germany) for the translation into English. It has been revised for the present publication. A German version of the text has been published with the title 'Abendmahl – Gabe Gottes und Danksagung der Beschenkten' in *Theologisches Gespräch*, 29 (2005), 131–148.

considered. Put another way: Baptists have too often sought to link themselves to Zwingli instead of Calvin. Through the theological connection to Zwingli, the essential spiritual function and power of the Lord's Supper is removed. Put simply, it is my conviction that the Lord's Supper receives and maintains its true and genuine importance only when we understand it not un-sacramentally, as Zwingli, but sacramentally, as Calvin. If we were to ask Baptist church members and pastors in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland what the Lord's Supper is, we would receive very often the answer that it is a meal of remembrance and of fellowship, not a sacrament, but a symbol. Although many believe that this is really the Baptist and the typical Reformed teaching, both these assumptions are inaccurate. The purely symbolic, anti-sacramental conception of the Lord's Supper is by no means the teaching which has become typical of the Reformed tradition, and it is also not the only stance adopted by Baptists in their theology and confessions.³ But, as it is so often argued in our ranks, I should like to enter into debate with it here.

The Purely Symbolic, Anti-sacramental Understanding (Ulrich Zwingli)

The purely symbolic, anti-sacramental understanding was introduced into Protestant theology by Ulrich Zwingli.⁴ Zwingli did not always emphasise the same things in this matter, but he has become relevant in the history of dogma and theology principally in that he refused to understand the Lord's Supper and baptism as sacraments, that is, as means of grace. Zwingli's key statement is that the Holy Spirit does not require a means of transport to reach people: 'He, (the Spirit) is himself the force and the carrier through which everything is brought. He does

³ Uwe Swarat, 'Gemeinschaft mit Christus und untereinander: Abendmahl und Abendmahlsgemeinschaft in der baptistischen Tradition', in *Eucharistie – Kirche – Ökumene: Aspekte und Hintergründe des Kommunionstreits*, ed. by Th. Söding and W. Thönissen, *Quaestiones Disputatae* 298 (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2019), pp. 224–253; Uwe Swarat, 'Das Verhältnis von Wort und Sakrament aus baptistischer Sicht', *Una Sancta, Zeitschrift für ökumenische Begegnung*, 77 (2022), 221–235.

⁴ Cf. W. P. Stephens, *Zwingli – An Introduction to His Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

not need to be brought himself.⁵ With this thesis, he not only denies that the Holy Spirit is mediated to us through the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, but also that the Spirit inevitably reaches us through preaching. All who are inclined to agree with Zwingli's criticism of the sacrament should recognise that it is based on a fundamental determination of the relationship between the Word and the Spirit, which sees the Holy Spirit as, in principle, independent of the Word of God. Zwingli admits that God usually uses the sermon to lead people to faith, but he deems this to be an accommodation of God to the weaknesses of human beings, who are too strongly bound to the perceptions of their senses. However, it does not correspond to God's being that God uses external means to cause internal processes. God uses the external means of the sermon, but God is not bound by this means to stir up faith. Zwingli states this because he wishes to emphasise the sovereignty and freedom of God who does not place salvation at the disposal of humans. At the same time, we sense a clear devaluation of the external as against the internal, or of the bodily as against the mental and spiritual, which has its origin not in the teaching of the Bible but in Platonist philosophy.

Concerning baptism and the Lord's Supper, it is generally known that Zwingli can characterise them in Latin as *sacramenta*, but he lays value on keeping the original semantic meaning of the word, namely 'oath'. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are oaths or pledges, and not God's oaths, but our oaths as believers for our intercourse among ourselves. The acting subject in the sacrament is not God but the believer. Accordingly, the sacraments can neither produce nor strengthen faith, they cannot even give persons assurance of God's grace and forgiveness. Assurance through the so-called sacraments happens rather on the human level. In receiving baptism and the Lord's Supper, a person gives an oath, that they are a Christian and that they align themselves with the church. Hence the church is assured that this person believes in Christ. At the same time, there lies in the taking of the sacraments the responsibility of the individual to live according to the rule of Christ. The sacraments are, nevertheless, no means of grace.

⁵ Zwingli, 'Fidei Ratio (1530)', in *Huldrych Zwingli, Schriften, Bd. IV* (Zürich: TVZ Theologischer Verlag, 1995), p. 113.

They are not signs of a grace which is given in them but are signs of grace which has already been granted.

Zwingli's understanding of the Lord's Supper conforms to this whole picture. Against the scholastic teaching on the repetition of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross on the altar of the church, he declares the Lord's Supper to be a remembrance of the sacrifice of Christ, which happened once and for all. And against the Lutheran teaching on the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in bread and wine, he states that, while it is true that the body and blood of Christ are present in the Lord's Supper, they are not in the elements but 'in the mind of the believer'.⁶ In both instances the believing person is stressed to be the subject in the Lord's Supper. It is the human who remembers the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and it is the human in whose mind Christ is present in the Lord's Supper. Zwingli's clash with Luther on the words of institution ('this is my body', or 'this means my body') is determined by his conviction that the external signs do not refer to a current act of grace by God but only to a past act. If we want a share in Christ, then, according to Zwingli, eating the bread and drinking the wine do not help us at all; only faith helps. Faith comes not from the sacraments but only from the Spirit of God, for external things can never effect internal results.

Having a symbolic understanding of the Lord's Supper in Zwingli's sense means, therefore, recognising only an internal presence of Christ in the mind of the believer and relating the Lord's Supper only to a past salvation event and not to a present act of God. It is the believing human who acts in the Lord's Supper and not God. It is a fellowship meal in the sense that men and women recognise themselves and others to be Christians and oblige themselves to live Christian lives in commitment to the church.

⁶ Zwingli, 'Amica Exegesis (1527)', in *Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke, Band V, CR XCII* (Leipzig: Heinsius, 1934), pp. 588–589.

Criticism of the Anti-sacramental Understanding of the Lord's Supper

This understanding of the Lord's Supper is, in my opinion, insufficient in essential points. The problem lies less in that which is said about the Lord's Supper than in that which is contested about the Supper. Put another way, the problem lies in the contrasts which arise from Zwingli's teaching.

The Separation of the Spirit from the Word

Zwingli's fundamental contention depends on his determination of the relationship between the word and the Spirit. He correctly observes that the sermon does not automatically and of itself create faith but that this is a work of the Spirit. Instead of establishing the necessary togetherness of word and Spirit, he one-sidedly emphasises the Spirit and reduces the significance of the sermon. He contradicts those who emphasise the word at the expense of the Spirit, and he commits the error of emphasising the Spirit and neglecting the word. But Spirit and Word belong together because the Christ in us (*in nobis*) and the Christ out of us, the Christ for us (*extra nos, pro nobis*) belong together. God's revelation and work of salvation are not immediately performed internally in us but happen at first outside of us in history. The word stands for this. Firstly, the Word that is Christ himself, then the word of Holy Scripture, which witnesses to him as the historical revelation of God, and finally the word of the sermon, which conveys the original witness to Christ through Scripture to each generation as the new, contemporary word. Because the faith through which we are saved is faith in the Word of God, therefore the Holy Spirit requires the word in order to stir up faith in us. The word is, in fact, transporter of the Holy Spirit. It carries the Holy Spirit from outside of us to us by witnessing to Christ, and the Holy Spirit carries the word into us by means of planting faith in our heart. Zwingli is worried that we place the sovereignty of God in danger when the Spirit is bound to the word, but he overlooks that God is sovereign enough to bind himself to the word as an external means. We can identify God through his word, and we should not disparage this. Thus, we should not look upon the sermon based on Holy Scripture as just being a human confession, which doubtless it is, but also as God's word in a human's mouth. We do not

need to fear for God's freedom when we expect that God himself addresses us through the sermon. As soon as we recognise the sermon to be an external means through which God is willing to give us his Holy Spirit and faith, we have already left Zwingli's theology. We can and must ask ourselves, whether baptism and the Lord's Supper, just as the sermon, are also forms of God's word and, therefore, also means of God's grace.

Only the Human and not God as the Subject of the Lord's Supper

The decisive topic for understanding baptism and the Lord's Supper lies in the question, who is their subject? Who is active in baptism and in the Lord's Supper? Zwingli's answer: it is the believer who acts. The believer confesses Christ and the church. This answer is, of course, correct, for baptism and the Lord's Supper are, in fact, a common act of the believing church and of the believing individual through which they confess themselves as belonging to each other and to Christ. But we must ask whether this says everything, that is, whether Zwingli is correct when he sees the sacraments *only* as an act of a human being and *not* as an act of God. This question has been and is being discussed in Baptist theology, usually in connection with baptism. Various theologians give differing answers here. It can also be asked in connection with the Lord's Supper. Does God act in the Lord's Supper in the present on the congregation of the faithful, or do the faithful just look back on an earlier act of God? Do we meet in the Lord's Supper the Christ *for us* or just the Christ *in us*? Does God, in the Lord's Supper, make the believers certain of his grace and does God strengthen their faith, or do the believers assure one another that they are living in God's grace? How we answer this question has far-reaching consequences for how we approach the Lord's Supper.

Precarious Consequences for Devotion at the Supper

It seems to me that the anti-sacramental Zwinglian understanding makes personal access to the Lord's Supper more difficult as it takes away our joy in it. An indication of this is the fact that Zwingli recommended taking the Lord's Supper just four times a year. When the significance of the Supper consists only in that the participants mutually confirm their faithfulness to Christ and to each other, then it really is sufficient

when this just happens at some few festive events. According to Zwingli, our faith is not strengthened through the Supper, and there is therefore no continuous spiritual need to be stilled by the Supper.

On the contrary, because the church members mutually confirm that they are under grace, the participant must ask themselves if they are capable at that time of confessing such a thing. The words of the Apostle Paul, which are often (in my younger days always) read at the table, that one should not unworthily celebrate the Supper (1 Cor 11:27–30), have been and still are immediately misunderstood with this background. One senses that one is not completely at peace with Christ or with the brothers and sisters and, therefore, shies away from participating in the Lord's Supper. But if one can only take part in the Supper when one has a firm faith and a clean conscience, the Supper then becomes a heavy burden. It stands before us as a law which requires works so that we can approach God, and not as the gospel, through which God calls those suffering under sin and doubt to cast their burden upon himself. One must know what one is doing when one says with Zwingli that the Lord's Supper does not give forgiveness, does not strengthen faith but just gives testimony, that we have already experienced all this. To such a Supper are not invited those who are 'poor in Spirit' (Matt 5:3), who know their need of God, but only those who feel themselves rich in the Spirit and strong in the faith, to confirm themselves mutually in this. The Supper can thus deter many of the burdened and tempt others to self-righteousness.

The Zwinglian understanding of the Lord's Supper as a remembrance meal has had a similar effect. It states that Christ becomes present at the table in that the participant is brought to think back on the cross of Christ. Here again the Supper becomes a demand on the believer, for they are required to imagine Christ for themselves. How close Christ comes to me during the Supper depends on how intensively I can imagine the events on the hill of Golgotha. This remembrance demands concentration, and, for this reason, it is often desired that the Supper is taken in silence. Although visible signs of God's goodness stand in bread and wine before the participants and are held out to them, people will often retreat into themselves and their power of imagination. Whoever succeeds in painting Christ before their mind's eye has the

impression of sensing Christ's presence. Whoever does not succeed in this puts themselves in question and becomes afraid of the next effort in this direction. This is the experience of not a few people in Baptist churches where the Supper is above all seen as an act on the part of humans. It becomes a law which drives some to desperation and others to trust in their own works.

The Meaning of the Lord's Supper according to the Accounts of its Institution

The worrying spiritual consequences of the Zwinglian teaching show that the gospel of Jesus Christ requires another kind of understanding of the Lord's Supper. I believe that the New Testament in fact offers another understanding of the Supper, namely, one which does not see the Supper only as a human confession of faith but also as a gift of God. As I do not have space for a more complete exegetical argument, I will limit myself to those observations which are the most essential, namely, the accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper. These reports are central to a proper understanding of the Supper, for the Lord's Supper is not celebrated in Christianity as a ceremony with an ecclesiastical origin, but as a rite, which Jesus Christ himself has instituted. Christianity is, therefore, bound in its understanding and practice of the Lord's Supper to the will of the donor. The content, which Jesus Christ invested in this ceremony, remains authoritative for all time. When we now inquire for the original meaning of the Lord's Supper at its institution, we pass over the many historical problems which are present in the accounts of the institution, and we concentrate on the characteristic features which become clear in all the reports. What can we learn from the institution of the Lord's Supper about its meaning and sense?

The Lord Gives, the Disciples Receive

The first simple, and decisive, observation consists in the fact that at the institution of the Supper, it is above all Jesus Christ who is acting. It is *he* who invites the disciples to the meal, *he* is the host at the table, *he* takes the bread and the wine, *he* prays, and *he* distributes bread and wine to those present. When the Christian church celebrates the Lord's Supper,

then it should happen in such a manner that it is still the table of *the Lord* around which they are gathered. Jesus is still the host and the one who distributes the gifts; even though he is no longer bodily present, he is present with his disciples through his word and Spirit as the one who has been raised into heaven. Jesus Christ acts in the power of God in the Lord's Supper on the disciples; the church receives the gifts from his hand.

Admittedly, the disciples also act during the meal, but their action is secondary to the initiative of God's Son. The disciples let themselves be invited to the table and be given the bread and the wine. This is not just passivity, for they respond voluntarily to the initiative of Christ. They are not dictated to; they accept the invitation. They are not force-fed, but they let themselves be given bread and wine. The disciples are therefore *active* in the sense that they are *voluntarily passive*; they let Christ give them a present. If one wants to describe what sort of action the disciples undertake at the Supper, one does it best with the term 'receiving action'.⁷ The action of the disciples consists in receiving gifts from their Lord. Both the Lord and the disciples are active at the Supper, in that the Lord takes the initiative and bestows his gifts, and the disciples accept them.

The Lord Carries Out an Action and Gives It Meaning

The second observation on the institution of the supper consists in the fact that the Lord speaks as well as acts. The distribution of bread and wine among the table companions is an action, but this action is accompanied by words which give it meaning. The togetherness of word and action is essential. If the Supper were an action without words, the disciples would have to state its meaning themselves and would thereby be unclear about the mind of the benefactor, or they would understand the action as a material-magical event which unfolds its efficacy without words and understanding. Both are eliminated in that Jesus himself gives his action meaning. The Supper is thus not a magical event but is an action, whose effectiveness is bound to the word, which the founder

⁷ I took this term (in German 'Empfangshandlung') from the Lutheran systematic theologian Werner Elert, *Der christliche Glaube: Grundlinien der lutherischen Dogmatik*, 6th edn (Erlangen: Martin Luther, 1988), p. 359.

speaks and which the participants hear and should accept. The Supper is also not an action which the disciples should give a meaning to according to their own insights, but one to which the founder himself gives meaning.

It must be observed, however, that Jesus does not only speak to his disciples but also that he performs this action with them. That which he wants to convey to them is expressed not only with words but also in an action. He does not just *say* that he will give them something, he actually *gives* it. Not only is a new teaching communicated, but an action is performed. In this, it is clear, on the one hand, that Jesus's word is not only one which explains, describes, and gives meaning, but it is a powerful, accomplishing word, namely, the word of the creator, which does what it says. On the other hand, it becomes clear that Jesus does not just wish to reach his disciples on an intellectual level, where he conveys spiritual knowledge, but in addition to their thinking, he makes a claim on their will and their doing, so that he has dealings with the disciples as whole beings and, therefore, clothes his word in an action. The Lord's Supper is thus an action which is given a meaning through the word of Jesus.

Jesus Dedicates the Fruit of His Dying to His Disciples

Our third observation directs itself to Jesus's words of explanation. There are different opinions as to what these words originally were. We do not have to discuss this here, but we will just take the simplest form: 'This is my body', 'this is my blood'. We have to understand these words in the context of the original events on the eve of Jesus's death on the cross. It is obvious that Jesus did not want to perform a substantial transformation of the bread and the wine and that the disciples could not have understood it in this way, for Jesus sat bodily among his disciples. His body and his blood could not at the same time be essentially in the bread and the wine. The 'is' in the words of institution is therefore to be understood in the first place as 'means', because the words belong to a symbolic action. However, with these words, Jesus identifies the bread with his body and the wine with his blood, and with this identification he distributes bread and wine to his disciples. The disciples receive bread and wine *as* Jesus's body and blood. What the action means really happens in this moment. In symbolic identification,

the bread 'is' that which it means, and the wine 'is' that which it means. The old fight about 'is' and 'means' in the words of institution does not do justice to the event of establishment, because, in this, both aspects belong together. It is misleading to ask whether the Supper is a reality *or* a symbol, for that which happens in the Supper is a reality-symbol. In the symbolic action, the meant spiritual reality is present.

What does Jesus mean when he identifies the bread with his body? The term 'body' stands for bodily life. He gives this life of his as nourishment to his disciples. He speaks of this at the farewell meal under the shadow of his coming death, he speaks of it in view of the *broken* bread, and he speaks of it in the context of his *shed* blood, about which he speaks immediately afterwards. Jesus's life, which he symbolically gives to the disciples, is thus the life consecrated to death, is the life which he is about to sacrifice. In this, he shows his disciples that not only his life, which he has lived up until then, but also his dying now means life for them, his disciples. The giving of his life unto death occurs for the good of the disciples. This is explicitly stated in the first epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians and in Luke's Gospel: 'This is my body, given for you', it is being sacrificed for your good. In John's Gospel, which does not directly report on the Lord's Supper, this meaning of the word concerning the bread is given very succinctly in Jesus's speech in John 6:48, 51. There Jesus says, 'I am the bread of life. This bread is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world.' This does not remain just a *word* of Jesus in the instituting of the Supper but becomes an *action*. When Jesus gives his disciples the bread, which means his life given for them in death, he dedicates to them in advance the salvation and the life that will spring out of his death.

The word concerning the cup, which comes together with the word concerning the bread, repeats that which the word on the bread has already said, the difference being that the meaning of the blood of Jesus in relationship to his violent death is even clearer. Jesus's death should be a power of salvation for his disciples and the foundation of a new covenant between God and humanity through the forgiveness of sins (compare Exod 24:8). Here also Jesus does not only *explain* the meaning of his death with words but *gives* the disciples the cup with the wine and truly dedicates to them that which the wine signifies. Thus, he

prepares his disciples for his death and takes care that they — at least afterwards — recognise that his bloody dying is an act of salvation, whose fruits are given to them. When Jesus here speaks of his body and blood, he does not mean two different substances that he wants to give them. He means with both terms nothing other than himself, his own life, which he gives unto death, for the salvation of others who receive this deed as deliverance. In giving himself in and with the bread and wine to the disciples, he gives them the deliverance which he achieves on the cross. What he achieves on the cross belongs to them. There are, thus, not two gifts distributed in the Lord's Supper but one gift in two forms. This one gift does not consist of a material substance but in the work of salvation, which Jesus has completed for us sinners. The gift, which is distributed to us at the Lord's Table, is the proceeds of Christ's dying: reconciliation with God, the new covenant.

The Scriptural Celebration of the Lord's Supper as Work of Grace and of Faith in One

If we consider these three observations on the institution of the Supper as a whole, it becomes clear that the Lord's Supper is a visible form or a ritual carrying out of the gospel. The gospel of the justification of sinners says that God wishes to give us eternal life through the giving of his Son unto death and that we are reconciled with God and taken into covenant with him when we accept in faith with gratitude what Jesus did for us on the cross. For Christ's sake, we are saved from the damning judgement of God, and that completely by grace, that is, through God's free favour toward us, completely without any merit on our part. At the same time, it is through faith alone, in that we let God give us salvation. In the gospel of justification, grace and faith belong together: the giving action of God and the grateful receiving action of humanity. In the same way, both God and humanity are active in the Lord's Supper, God in his grace, in which he gives us the yield of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, and humanity in faith, through which humanity lets themselves be given the gift of acceptance into the covenant. We cannot do justice to the Lord's Supper, neither when we understand it with Zwingli to be a human's act of faith and of confession alone, nor when we understand it to be a means of grace, whose efficacy is independent of a human's

faith and confession. We have in the Lord's Supper the same togetherness of God and a human action as in baptism, which should not surprise us, because both baptism and the Lord's Supper anchor our salvation in the death of Christ and are, therefore, both visible forms of the gospel of justification. George R. Beasley-Murray has finely said of baptism, 'It is the God-determined rendezvous between grace and faith.'⁸ This is exactly true of the Lord's Supper as well. The Lord's Supper and baptism are, therefore, a relationship-event between God and humankind, a meeting in which God turns to the human and the human turns to God.

This meeting character moulds not only the event of justification but God's whole history with humanity of revelation and salvation. Emil Brunner has correctly emphasised that everything which occurs between God and humanity has the structure of a personal correspondence, an encounter on the level of the I and the you, where God opens himself for the human and the human reciprocally themselves for God.⁹ For this reason, the Christian service of worship cannot be properly understood if it is not comprehended as a dialogue, as the meeting in which God speaks to the people and the people answer to God. In the service, it comes to a meeting between God and humanity, because God leans down to humanity (katabatical, descending aspect of the service) and because humanity sends their prayers and songs up to God (anabatical, ascending aspect of the service). The German word 'Gottesdienst' includes both aspects of this encounter. The service is the place where God serves us men and women, and — this is fundamental — the service is also the place at which we humans serve God. In the same way, the place of baptism and the Lord's Supper, namely, the service of the gathered church, leads us to the knowledge that baptism and the Lord's Supper are sacraments in the sense that God serves us in them through his gift and that we serve God through our confession and through our gratitude.

⁸ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 273.

⁹ Emil Brunner, *Wahrheit als Begegnung* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1938; 2nd edn, 1963); English version: *Truth as Encounter* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964).

The Lord's Supper as a Meal of Remembrance and Fellowship

If we call the Lord's Supper a meal of remembrance and fellowship, as is frequently done in Baptist churches, then we should not interpret the two terms 'remembrance' and 'fellowship' just as human acts, but we should see God's working in it as well. Remembrance and fellowship are not just things which we *enact* but are firstly something that we *receive*.

Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper according to both Luke and Paul with the words, '*Do this in remembrance of me.*' The remembrance of Jesus giving his life for us should take place through the act, an act which has been given to us by the Lord and which re-enacts that the Lord gives himself to us. The participants at the Supper are not called upon to exercise their imagination, through which they move themselves notionally into the past. The Lord's Supper is much more itself the remembrance of Jesus. When the believer repeats what Jesus did with his disciples on the eve of his death, then that historical Supper and the salvation-event symbolised therein are repeated anew. It is Jesus who brings himself into remembrance through the Lord's Supper and dedicates to us today — as he did then to the first disciples — the fruit of his death. As we celebrate the Lord's Supper, Jesus's sacrificial death is made present to us, so that it benefits us too. The Lord's Supper is not at first a matter of our remembering (active) but that we are reminded (passive); it is not a question of our human capability to transfer ourselves notionally into the past, but it is a question of God's will to make the past event present for us. The remembrance which happens in the Supper is, therefore, firstly a gift of Jesus. Our own commemoration of his death takes place in that we allow ourselves to be given the Supper.

The Lord's Supper is a meal of fellowship, indeed. But the fellowship which results from the Lord's Supper is not only an expression of interpersonal fellowship but a communion with Christ. When Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 10:16–21 of the 'communion of the blood' and of the 'body of Christ', he understands communion as sharing. Through the cup and the bread, the believers get to share in the blood and the body of Christ, that is, they receive a share not in the

substances of the blood and body of Christ, but in that which Christ through his dying has done for them. The Lord's Table is a meal of fellowship, first of all in the sense that it joins us to Christ as the originator of our salvation. Jesus Christ gives us fellowship with himself. This 'vertical' dimension of the fellowship, the connection between Christ and the believer, is the primary aspect of the Lord's Supper, for the Supper is and remains the *Lord's Table*, to which we are invited. Nonetheless, in this bond with Christ lies the basis for the bond among the believers, that is, for the 'horizontal' dimension of the fellowship. Because the individual believers are bound up with Christ, they are at the same time inserted into the fellowship of the believers; the bond with Christ is not for individuals alone, but for all who believe. Thus, the fellowship of believers has its basis in Jesus Christ. As Christ gives himself as deliverer for all, he combines the beneficiaries into a fellowship. The common share in Christ creates the church, and, therefore, every Lord's Supper reminds us also of the fellowship among the believers. The Lord's Supper is, to a certain extent, the crossing point of the vertical and the horizontal dimension of the Christian fellowship. As a fellowship meal, the Lord's Table is at first a gift of the Lord to the believers. It is the Lord himself who grants a share in his work of salvation and through this joins the guests at the table in fellowship. Whatever form the participants give to the fellowship, it can only be a consequence of the divine gift around which the meal is centred.

The Twofold Meaning of the Lord's Supper in the Protestant-Reformed Tradition

Ulrich Zwingli

The understanding which I have sketched above — and which I take to conform to scripture — of the Lord's Supper as both an act of grace and of faith has often been missed in the history of theology, where before Zwingli, the human side, the act of faith, had been mostly underestimated. Zwingli tried to compensate for this failure but tended to overestimate the human side and thus did not do justice to the grace-character of the Supper. We have to make a similar judgement on some

utterances from the Baptist side and from related churches. Zwingli himself seems to have been conscious at times of the shortcomings of his theology in this matter. When he calls the sacraments ‘signs of the covenant’ he means, at first in his typical manner, that the sacraments are related to the covenant between the people in the church; they are a sign by which others are assured that we belong to them. Around the end of his life, he took up other ideas; for example, he held that the sacraments are signs of the divine covenant, through which God strengthens our faith. Here appears in outline with Zwingli a connection between the vertical, interpersonal dimension of the sacrament and the horizontal, human-and-God-connecting dimension which above all Calvin later represented.

John Calvin

Calvin’s teaching on the Lord’s Supper cannot be adopted today in all its trains of thought. The controversies at the time of the Reformation circled above all around the heavenly (ascended) body of Christ and, thus, around the teaching on the two natures of Christ and the understanding of the ascension of Christ. The discussion ended with all persons involved in aporia, so that the arguments of those controversies cannot simply be reproduced today. Nevertheless, Calvin’s teaching on the Lord’s Supper still offers helpful orientation, in that it pulls the Holy Spirit into the centre and thus gives weight to God’s actions as well as to human action. According to Calvin, it is the Holy Spirit who makes the body and the blood of Christ present in the Supper. Against the Catholic and the Lutheran teachings, he emphasises that the body and blood of Christ cannot be materially-spatially present in the elements. The elements do not enclose Christ in themselves, but they illustrate what Christ wishes to be for us. The body and the blood of Christ are nevertheless present but mediated through the Holy Spirit, who uses the words of institution and the external elements to give us a share in the death and life of Christ. The Lord’s Supper has not only a cognitive meaning, in which it symbolises what the gospel says to us, but also a causative purpose, in which as a tool of the Holy Spirit it offers and distributes to us that which it characterises. Bread and wine are certainly just signs and not the thing itself. But they are not empty signs, for Christ has given them to us to assure us of his promise. Calvin writes, ‘To all

these things we have a complete attestation in this sacrament, enabling us certainly to conclude that they are as truly exhibited to us as if Christ were placed in bodily presence before our view, or handled by our hands' (*Institutio Christianae Religionis* IV,17,3).¹⁰ Later, he says,

For why does the Lord put the symbol of his body into your hands, but just to assure you that you truly partake of him? If this is true let us feel as much assured that the visible sign is given us in seal of an invisible gift as that his body itself is given to us. (*Institutes* IV,17,10)

According to Calvin, we receive Jesus Christ truly in his body and blood, given for us, but we receive him not spatially enclosed by the elements, but in that the Holy Spirit nourishes our soul with Christ when our bodily mouth receives the bread and the wine. For Calvin, an effectual Lord's Supper is a gracious act of God and a human act of faith in one. First, God wishes to assure us in the Supper of his good will and thus strengthens our faith. Secondly, the Supper is the place granted to us to praise God and to glorify him with our confession, to demonstrate the unity of the believer with Christ and with other believers, and to guard this unity. These statements on the meaning of the Supper, in which Calvin integrates Zwingli's concerns, but also goes beyond Zwingli, correspond to that which Calvin gives as a definition of a sacrament, in which he pays accord to God's action as well as the human's. A sacrament is 'an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of good-will toward us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in our turn testify our piety towards him, both before himself, and before angels as well as men' (*Institutes* IV,14,1).

The Consensus Tigurinus 1549

The double character of the sacraments of baptism and Lord's Supper (e.g. that God testifies to us of his grace in them and we testify our faith before God and people) was accepted by Zwingli's successor Heinrich Bullinger as well as by the church in Zurich. Calvin and Bullinger both

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: the Calvin Translation Society, 1845).

declared in the ‘Mutual Agreement concerning Sacramental Substance’ (*Consensus Tigurinus*) of 1549¹¹ that

the goals and purposes of the sacraments are such as to be marks and tokens of Christian profession and community or fraternity [...]. But the goal which is preeminent among others is that through them God may testify, represent, and seal (*testetur, repraesentet atque obsignet*) his grace to us. (no. 7)

Moreover, while the testimonies and seals of his grace which God has given us are true, without any doubt he truly offers inwardly by his Spirit that which the sacraments figure to our eyes and other senses. [...] And likewise we may give thanks for these blessings once displayed on the cross which we now grasp daily by means of faith. (no. 8)

Calvin opened up the possibility for a balanced teaching on baptism and the Lord’s Supper, which understands them as a gift for faith as well as an expression of faith. As this teaching has been shown to be scriptural, it is necessary in my opinion for our Baptist theology and for our churches to find unanimity on this basis.

The Ecumenical Significance of an Understanding of Sacrament Which Links Grace and Faith

With such a balanced teaching on baptism and the Lord’s Supper, an important contribution would be made for an ecumenical theology and for an inter-church *rapprochement* in doctrine. We can observe in the last decades — at least in areas where German is spoken — that in the theology outside of the Reformed tradition the acceptance of such a starting point in the doctrine of the sacraments has also grown. The Leipzig Lutheran Ulrich Kühn defined the sacraments as ‘real symbolical acts of faith of the church of Jesus Christ’.¹² Kühn’s teaching on the sacraments begins with the recognition that the sacraments are rites ‘in which the church expresses its belonging to Christ and commits itself to the triune God’. The human response and confession aspect of

¹¹ *Consensus Tigurinus (1549): Die Einigung zwischen Heinrich Bullinger und Johannes Calvin über das Abendmahl*, ed. by Emidio Campi and Ruedi Reich (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2009); translation of the *Consensus* from the original Latin into English in this volume is found from p. 258 onwards.

¹² Ulrich Kühn, *Sakramente*, Handbuch Systematischer Theologie, Band 11 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1985), pp. 306, 308, 312.

the sacraments, which were fundamental for Zwingli and has always been held correctly by Baptists, is thus also found here in the foreground with a Lutheran, who had worked in the context of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). He emphasises that the Spirit-worked faith has a constitutive significance for the sacrament. According to Kühn, a mediation of salvation also takes place in the sacrament, because Christ as head of his church is present and active through his Spirit in the service of worship. Through Christ's promise the sacraments become means, in which the believing church 'experiences the presence and favour of its Lord in a particularly intensive manner'. It would be rewarding if Baptist theology would take up a dialogue with this kind of Lutheran theology.

It is not just Lutheran theology where the confessional character of the Supper is emphasised. In Catholic theology there are also valuable testimonies that the sacraments are acts of grace and faith in one. The Dutch scholar Edward Schillebeeckx, for example, declared that the sacraments are moments of personal encounter between God or Christ and the individual believer.¹³ For Schillebeeckx, the sacraments are visible forms of expression of the love of God, which is freely given and which must also be freely accepted. Without the returned love towards God on the part of the recipient, the sacrament would be a 'deceiving sign'. The Budapest-born French-German systematic theologian Alexandre Ganoczy interprets sacraments as 'systems of verbal and non-verbal communication' within the church and as 'interactive encounter events between the grace and the faith of particular [...] members of a concrete church'.¹⁴ The Swiss systematic theologian Eva-Maria Faber treats the sacraments as ways of 'mediation between God and human', in which the 'godness' of God is made open for human beings and the humanness of men and women is brought into movement toward God.¹⁵ With Faber too appears the term 'personal encounter' between God and humanity, with the consequence that, for her, the 'response of faith' belongs to the 'objective form of the sacrament'. It is surely not

¹³ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christus, Sakrament der Gottesbegegnung* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1960), p. 135.

¹⁴ Alexandre Ganoczy, *Einführung in die katholische Sakramentenlehre*, 3rd edn (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991), p. 116.

¹⁵ Eva-Maria Faber, *Einführung in die katholische Sakramentenlehre* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002), pp. 24, 64–65.

accidental that both Ganoczy and Faber have done research on Calvin. One can recognise in their teaching on the sacraments an effect of the Protestant-Reformed teaching on Catholic theology.

Grateful Reception of the Gifts of Christ: Observing the Lord's Supper in a Manner that Conforms with the Gospel

In devoutly practising the Lord's Supper, the significance cannot be underestimated of understanding this rite not one-sidedly as a means of grace or as an act of faith, but as a mediation of a personal encounter between God and human. The gathered faithful receive in the Supper a representation of the saving gospel, which is the origin of all spiritual life. So as the Lord invites us as his disciples to his table, he seals for us each time anew the union between God and ourselves and between the disciples themselves. He affirms and makes us sure of the communion between God and ourselves and thereby also of the basis of the fellowship of the believers among themselves. Through this confirmation of what God promises to us, God strengthens our faith, our love, and our hope. The Lord's Supper strengthens our faith, because it assures us that Jesus Christ died for us and that we obtain forgiveness of our sins and eternal life. It strengthens our love, both our love for God and for our brothers and sisters. Our love for God is made stronger, in that we thank him for his wonderful gift in Christ and bring him our sacrifice of praise. Our love for the church is made stronger in that we share not alone but together in Christ's work of salvation, and we thank God together for his blessings. Finally, our hope is made stronger, because the faith and love, which the gift of God stirs up in us, are a pledge and deposit of the coming glory, in which we shall celebrate in unlimited communion with the Lord the festival of his eternal kingdom. Thus, a joy at the Lord's Supper arises already now, which we experience not as a burden but as a blessing and therefore gladly celebrate it. Such a celebration honours God, because it glorifies him as the provider of good gifts. Then, as always when these things are done rightly, God's honour and human joy are bound together.