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Q&A#32 Should the Lord's Supper Have a Sombre Tone?

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Today's question: "I am wondering about your take on whether the Lord's supper should be a somber event of introspection or a joyous meal of celebration. My understanding is that throughout church history it has been observed more as a somber event, but through the works of people like Leithart and Jordan I have come to see it as mainly a celebration of God's kindness and favor."

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is a longer one, and towards the second half is more of a comment than a question, so I'll read out the beginning and respond to that. I'm wondering about your take on whether the Lord's Supper should be a sombre event of introspection or a joyous meal of celebration.

My understanding is that throughout church history it has been observed more as a sombre event, but through the works of people like Lighthouse and Jordan, I have come to see it mainly as a celebration of God's kindness and favour. It's a good question to ask, and I think the key issue here is how does Christ's death function in relationship to the supper, and what does it mean to remember the Lord's death until he comes? Now, when we look at the relationship between the death of Christ and the supper, there are many ways in which that could be drawn. We could be conceiving of Christ very much still on the cross, still in suffering and agony, and reflecting upon what that means, how

that relates to our sin, how that relates to our guilt, and how that relates to the fact of our forgiveness.

And so such an understanding of the supper will be characterised very much by a sombre tone, a tone of penitence and grief over our sin, perhaps a very introspective and meditative tone. A tone where we're very much taking on the flavour of the tomb. You come to the tomb and you reflect upon what that person has done, that past action.

It's a retrospective thing in its character, very much looking back and reflecting upon the meaning of Christ's suffering and the character of Christ's suffering. Now, clearly that should be an aspect of what's taking place, but there's another way to think about it. If we think about Christ's death more prospectively, it has a different tone.

So Christ's death prospectively is not a matter of thinking about his suffering on the cross as if he was still hanging on the cross. Rather, it's thinking about Christ's death as a completed action in history that has won the victory over the rule of this world and over the principalities and powers. An event through which he was glorified, in which he was risen, ascended and won the victory and now sits at God's right hand.

That the death of Christ is a great turning point in history. And so as we remember that, it's not a matter of casting our minds back to Christ's suffering so much as a memorialisation of that. We memorialise Christ's death until he comes.

Now, a memorialisation is a recounting of that event in a way that manifests its prospective force. Its force going forward, pressing into the future. And so the significance of the death of Christ, I think, is more of that character.

It's the significance of a death that we proclaim until he comes. So this isn't an event that has ceased in its efficacy, in its power, in its force. Christ's sufferings have ceased.

Christ does not continue to suffer. But the cross and its power continue to operate in the present. And that's what we declare in the Lord's Supper until Christ returns.

And so memorialising Christ's death is a celebration of his victory more than it is a meditation upon the sufferings that he suffered. Because those sufferings, once they have achieved their end, are no longer front and centre of the New Testament. Even within John 16, we hear the description of the woman whose birth pangs yield the birth of a son and then great joy.

That the joy eclipses the sorrow and that there is a point where the sorrow of the disciples, their mourning over the death of Christ, will be replaced by joy. The very events that were associated with sorrow will be ones of deep joy and celebration. And so we celebrate the Lord's death until he comes.

Now I think there's more going on here. Another thing to remember is that within the

Gospels and within the New Testament, more generally as we move into Acts, Christ's demonstration of his resurrection is found in recalling his death and recalling the events of the Last Supper. So we see, particularly in the events surrounding Emmaus, that Jesus is made known to the disciples as he takes bread, he breaks it and he blesses it and then gives it to the disciples.

And then the eyes are opened and they see him. To that point they had not recognised his body. They had spoken about the way that the women had gone to the tomb and not found the body and that Christ had not been seen.

And so at that point Christ is disclosed to them and the connections between this and the Eucharist should not be missed. In the Lord's Supper, Christ is disclosed to his people in the breaking of bread. Now that disclosure of the body of Christ is a disclosure of the crucified body of Christ.

But it's the crucified body that has been raised. It's the body of Christ that has gone into death and come out the other side. And what we see following the resurrection is a series of meals.

Meals on the beach, Jesus meeting with his disciples for a meal, if you look at the Greek at the beginning of Acts. In all of these contexts, there is Christ's demonstration of his resurrection in eating with his disciples in communion. And likewise, when we celebrate communion, we're declaring Christ's death, but we're also declaring his resurrection until he comes.

And so this is a memorialisation of his death, a memorialisation of his victory, a celebration of his victory. An event that takes the original form of that sorrowful celebration of the Last Supper as the shadow of what Christ is about to suffer hangs over the event. And it takes that and it takes also the event of Emmaus as Christ is disclosed to his disciples in the breaking of bread in a way that is filled with surprise and joy and delight.

And both aspects of that are present in our celebration of the supper. Neither tone should be neglected. But I think that the primary tone should be one of celebration and joy.

It's an event that looks forward until he comes. It's an anticipation of the great marriage supper of the Lamb. It's an anticipation, as it were, of the grapes of Eshcol, the fruit of the Lamb to come.

And in all of these respects, I think that it has a primarily prospective emphasis. It's looking forward to the future, to what we will celebrate in the future, to what we will enjoy in the future. A memorialisation of what has happened in the past, but a memorialisation in the same way as the people of Israel memorialised the Passover, that

that memorial year upon year, and Christ celebrated the Passover in the Last Supper, that this memorialisation was an event that pointed towards future deliverance.

It was an anticipation of what God was going to do in the future, not just a bare repetition of what God had done in the past. Rather, it was God's declaration of purpose in the Exodus that was taken as a promise for Israel's future. Likewise, what Christ has done in his death, in his giving of his body, is a demonstration and a surety of what will happen in the future.

And that death has not ceased its power. It's an event that continues in its power, continues to demonstrate Christ's victory over the principalities and powers, continues to show forth forgiveness and reconciliation, and continues to declare this future event of Christ's coming and the marriage supper that we will enjoy at that point. So I think the tone should primarily be one of celebration and joy.

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