

# The Lord's Supper: Mysticized & Miniaturized

Vincent Cheung

Copyright © 2010 by Vincent Cheung  
PO Box 15662, Boston, MA 02215, USA  
<http://www.vincentcheung.com>

Three sets of verses are considered in connection with the Lord's Supper. The first comes from the Synoptic Gospels: Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, and Luke 22:14-20. The second is 1 Corinthians 11:20-34. And the third is John 6:53-57.

This third passage is usually included in an exposition of the doctrine; however, it is unlikely that it refers to the Lord's Supper, and thus should be excluded. Robert Reymond offers four reasons.<sup>1</sup> First, the context does not fit. Jesus was addressing people who would not have understood a reference to an ordinance that he had not yet instituted. Second, "flesh" is not the word he later used when he instituted the ordinance. Third, his words are absolute and pertain to salvation. It is impossible that, to attain salvation, Jesus required participation in an ordinance that he had not yet instituted. And in fact, the biblical teaching is that a person attains salvation before he participates. Fourth, the context stresses hearing and believing his words (v. 63), so that the eating of his flesh and the drinking of his blood are best understood as metaphors for the acceptance of his teachings.

To illustrate the fourth point, Jesus called himself the bread from heaven, or manna (John 6:30-40), but that referred to spiritual nourishment through faith in him, and not the work of atonement symbolized by broken bread. He makes this very point in that context: "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life" (v. 40). Thus it would be an equivocation to identify this bread of nourishment with the bread of communion.

Therefore, the New Testament doctrine of the Lord's Supper mainly rests on the Synoptic and Pauline verses.

The Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper is without doubt superior to the abomination of Catholicism. That said, it has its own problems. Although less severe, these problems continue to maintain human tradition and superstition above the plain teaching of Scripture. Of course, not all of them are unique to the Reformed tradition. Here I will list two of them.

First, the Lord's Supper has been mysticized. This is seen in two aspects of the Reformed doctrine, and these are the "real" presence and the spiritual nourishment associated with the elements. Calvin's formulation was indefinite and unintelligible, even absurd. As Reymond points out, Charles Hodge regarded it as "peculiar," and William Cunningham said that it was "about as unintelligible as Luther's consubstantiation" and "perhaps, the greatest blot in the history of Calvin's labours as a public instructor." Robert Dabney denounced it as "strange" and "not only incomprehensible, but impossible."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps Calvin himself perceived the difficulties, and finally resorted to an appeal to mystery – a

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 963-964.

<sup>2</sup> Reymond, p. 961.

favorite excuse of Reformed theologians to affirm something that they cannot defend, or that they cannot even state intelligibly.<sup>3</sup>

In any case, the definitive hurdle is that the Synoptic and Pauline verses do not mention or even hint at any sort of presence or nourishment when it comes to the Lord's Supper. There is no biblical basis for them. They appear to be completely made up in order to romanticize the ordinance, and to infuse it with mystical piety. Thus Calvin's formulation cannot be rescued, and to the extent Reformed variations maintain these two aspects of the formulation, they perpetuate the absurdity.

Second, the Lord's Supper has been miniaturized. The Synoptic verses indicate that the ordinance was instituted in the context of a full meal. The Pauline verses assume that the Supper was substantial enough to satisfy hunger and for someone to get drunk. The apostle commanded the believers to wait for each other before they eat, or if they were too hungry, to eat at home (1 Corinthians 11:20-21, 33). This would make no sense if the ordinance consisted of tiny cups and crackers that were consumed in a few seconds.

The Lord's Supper is a figure for feasting at the Master's table. In oriental cultures, and in a weaker form also in Western cultures, it is a sign of friendship to dine with another person, and it is a sign of rejection to refuse to eat with him (1 Corinthians 5:11). To sit at the king's table was a tremendous honor (2 Samuel 9:7), and those who eat together are the dearest friends and comrades. In the Lord's Supper, Christians sit together at the King's table – regardless of race, status, or gender – to eat and drink to his honor, in remembrance of his sacrifice for us, and in anticipation of his return. This bond by virtue of our common allegiance to the King of Kings is stronger than blood relation, and the Table provides the context for this bond to manifest and develop.

All of this is obscured when the ordinance is reduced to tiny cups and crackers. The full meaning of the Table, the deep fellowship, the joy and laughter, the comfort and encouragement, the full remembrance of what the Lord has done over hours of conversation, are all lost. All debates concerning the elements are limited in significance as long as we are arguing about tiny cups and crackers, because all this time there is in fact no actual *supper* to speak of, and the whole practice has been much more unbiblical, ritualistic, and meaningless than people realize.

---

<sup>3</sup> Vincent Cheung, *Blasphemy and Mystery*.