

Directing the Lord's Supper

By Bob Young

It is a privilege and honor to serve God's people by directing the Lord's Supper. In the Supper, God's people commune with him. In the Supper, God's people commune with one another. While my religious heritage generally prefers the terminology, Lord's Supper, the term communion is also well-known. This article suggests biblical backgrounds, thoughts, and ideas that can be helpful as a worship leader prepares some brief words to be shared before the Supper.

Often, the passage in 1 Cor. 11:23-26 is read. This text is Paul's reminder to the Corinthian church about the institution of the Supper and its significance for fellowship. The passage provides an excellent, yet brief, summary of the events of the Passover meal where Jesus instituted the Supper as a lasting memorial. The text also suggests several helpful questions.

- Why or how does the Supper proclaim the death of Christ?
- What does it mean to eat or drink in any unworthy manner? (distinguish the manner of participation from the state of the person who participates, that is, note the difference between unworthily, an adverb of manner, and unworthy, a descriptive adjective)
- What is the impact of failing to participate in the Supper?

Some may find it helpful to study the Old Testament parallels and background for the Supper. In the Old Testament, Exodus recounts God's identity and activities in rescuing the Israelites from Egypt through the Passover. The New Testament says Christ is our Passover, and the actions of God in the Old Testament provide helpful and interesting insights into what God does through the sacrifice of Christ, paralleling the deliverance of the Old Testament. (Also helpful is a study of how some of the material in Deuteronomy foreshadows God's intentions in delivering his people.) Another helpful Old Testament passage which can help focus thoughts in the Supper is Isaiah 63:7-19.

Open wide the door of Scripture as you contemplate God's saving work at the cross, the focus of our memorial in the Supper. The Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 52-53 is well-known, and often used in connection with the Supper. Equally helpful are those passages (Old and New Testament) that remind us how, when, where, and why God is at work in the world. Many such passages will also serve to initiate thoughts about appropriate human responses. You may also try to use a text that can be applied in a variety of ways over a period of several weeks (consider Psalm 95 as an example).

As you explore Scripture for reflections of the events of the Supper, let me encourage caution. Be careful that you honor the context of Scripture and make valid applications. (An example of a passage frequently misapplied, in my judgment, is John 6 where the parallel seems obvious, but is more difficult than may appear on the surface.)

The Supper is an opportunity to remember what God has done. The New Testament (gospels and letters) use several verbs to describe the actions or thoughts of God and Jesus.

- Luke 22:15, I too will forgive
- Luke 22:15, with much desire, I have desired to eat with you. Jesus indicates in this phrase his desire to be with those he has chosen, despite their lack of faith and failure to comprehend his purpose.
- John 13, I have given you an example, love as I love. Jesus reminds that a great problem of discipleship is the heart problem. The sins may be on the rim of the wheel, but the source of the problems is at the center of the wheel.

Both 1 Corinthians 11 and the gospel accounts of the Last Supper point us to contemplate why we remember and how we remember. One way to approaching the process of remembering is to distinguish “remembering back” from “remembering forward.” Do we, in the Supper, take ourselves back to the cross, or do we bring the cross into the present? Scripture seems to support the latter more than the former, although we often hear the former phrase used, probably because of our typical understandings of remembering. Another aspect of remembrance is that it should change us. How are we changed by remembering?

Another passage that speaks to the way communion connects the people of God is 1 Corinthians 10. The passage provides helpful insights into what occurs as God’s people share the communion meal.

Finally, let me share some hints to guide your preparation.

- Avoid ritualism. Insofar as possible, make each Sunday a fresh worship experience. That is the goal.
- Consider altering the order of the contribution and Supper, and the overall place these elements occupy in the assembly.
- Separate the contribution and supper (but do not locate the contribution too early in the worship service).
- Consult some of the many resource books that are available.
- Consider a theme such as “what the Supper means to me” or a special experience of the Supper from time to time. In working on the first of these ideas, you might interview various members of the church and share their insights as you help prepare the congregation to commune with God and one another.
- As you input to the worship theme and order, try to understand the atmosphere and goal of the worship experience on a certain day.