

Introduction

In 1 Corinthians 11 we see Paul address a more practical practice that was a custom related to the Lord's Supper. Although it is speculated as to why it was being celebrated in this way, it seems that there was division around the communion table. Paul corrects this by pointing out that the inequities at the meal "show contempt for the church of God"¹, going on to state that this is a meal meant to mark the institution of a new covenant, which should convey unity rather than division. How we have handled the communion table since has been one of great division throughout church history and has even become an important boundary marker for certain expressions of faith. Although initially the intent to understand the theological significance of the Eucharist was meant for good and the purity of knowing how to properly handle the elements in as an act of worship, further division came as a result in varied interpretive understanding fractioning even further denominational differences. More recent efforts have been made to recover the unity of belief around the Lord's Table through the work of BEM (Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry). However, even still many remain unaffected by this work. In my opinion, the table is inherently hosted by Christ for the sake of the unity of His church. Therefore, I believe there is still work to be done to bring unity back to His celebration feast of both remembrance and hopeful expectation. Many, both Christian and non-Christian, have observed the supreme irony in the fact that the Eucharist, which should be the most visible manifestation of Christians' unity, has instead become the most visible locus of their disunity!² There is urgency for oneness that we see throughout the New Testament, which is most sharply represented in Ephesians 4 ("one Lord, one faith, one baptism") and in John 17's prayer of Jesus

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:22 NABRE

² Kenneth E. Christopherson, "Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again: The Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry Document," *American Baptist Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (1985): 372, <https://ezproxy.nyack.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0000955405&site=eds-live>.

that his followers "will all be one... so that the world will believe...".³ The following is a response to that urgency.

This paper will seek to address understanding the Eucharist through the complexity of its development since its institution. A discussion on the meaning of the Eucharist will seek to unpack the significance that it might have had for its original audience, which help us to understand its "shape" for practice and celebration today. Lastly, we will discuss the recent years' worth of work to bring back unity to the church and how greater unity is possible around the Lord's Table. First, we must begin by addressing the nature of doctrine and how we are to study it within a historical framework.

The historical development of doctrine

In order to discuss the doctrine of the Eucharist, we first must explore the nature of doctrine and how are we to think of it. Is doctrine something that should be rooted in antiquity? Or does it grow over time? Jaroslav Pelikan notes in, *Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine*, that "change is the law of history".⁴ If "change" is inevitable, does that make theological "change" acceptable? Pelikan goes on to argue that theological change could only distort what was present from the early church, not enhance it.⁵ Which then begs the question related to the doctrine of the Eucharist: "did the early church have an accurate understanding of the Eucharist as Christ meant for them to have?" And is it even possible for us

³ Christopherson, "Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again: The Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry Document," 365.

⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 3,
<https://ezproxy.nyack.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2616269&site=eds-live>.

⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine*, 4.

to know such a thing? The following is a discussion and review of historical development of doctrine and some of the challenges we face when studying it.

The first question we must ask is: "is there such a thing as a uniform doctrine?" Uniformity of an understanding and practice of doctrine is virtually non-existent throughout history when it comes to large and diverse people groups. We often make the mistake of simplifying our definitions of historical religious groups being that we are removed from the complexity of the times they existed in and limited resources to piece together their belief systems. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald speak to this reality in their book, *The World of the New Testament*, by pointing out that in the time of Jesus, there was no singular expression of Judaism, comparing the similar nature of Christianity in America at the turn of the twenty first century.⁶ Though both can attribute commonalities in practices, on other issues there was wide variance on scriptural interpretation. Take for example the different Jewish sects that existed in the time of the Second Temple Period. Some of the sects of Judaism entrenched in their understanding of the "Torah" were the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. Are we then to accept fractioning and division as part of an inevitable reality when it comes to doctrine?

Pelikan makes the case that "without perfect theology, we are bound to disagree/fragment".⁷ Simply accepting fragmentation, is to miss the opportunity, however, that we still have to function in unity as the church. An acknowledgement of such a limitation does require further examination though. Particularly when it comes to how we are to think of theology as it relates to both community life, history, culture, and tradition. Robert L. Calhoun explores these particulars in his article "The Role of Historical Theology".

⁶ Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald, eds., *The World of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 3.

⁷ Pelikan, *Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine*, 7.

Calhoun makes the point that the reflective interpretations that arise thus in the midst of community life are going to be varied in their responses to a changing historical and a permanent eternal environment, which will lead to Christian and semi-Christian doctrines of many sorts.⁸ Calhoun goes on to point out that theological doctrines have their primary locus in religious devotion, in the deepest loyalties of particular men and communities. The right balance between objectivity and personal commitment is not easy to define nor to maintain.⁹ Therefore, we must carefully approach the matter of exploring doctrine and its development, holding that history can only help bring a limited understanding to both particular and community devotion at the time in practice and understanding of theology. How does this relate to the topic of the Eucharist?

Pelikan emphasizes this sentiment when he points out that the debate over the evidence for the "Real Presence" in the Eucharist is "an index to the historical difficulty of putting to an ancient text a question that, at least in our formulation, had not occurred to its author".¹⁰ That reality must also be held in tension that history and tradition can still be a helpful to put together a fuller understanding of doctrine and its growth and development, without establishing dogmatic absolutism.¹¹ Calhoun makes this point stating: "We see more clearly what was in Paul when we have studied Marcion, Augustine, and Luther, or what was in John when we read Ignatius and Irenaeus. Each illuminates the others, not by simple repetition but by the combination of reinforcements and contrasts that appear when strongly marked individual thinkers develop kindred insights in different ways."¹²

⁸ Robert L. Calhoun, "The Role of Historical Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 21, no. 4 (1941): 444, <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.nyack.edu/stable/1198626>.

⁹ Calhoun, "The Role of Historical Theology," 446.

¹⁰ Pelikan, *Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine*, 10.

¹¹ Pelikan, 159.

¹² Calhoun, 448-449.

History collects and illuminates the development of theological thought. However, it does not address directly the division and variance amongst differing communities of theology.

Calhoun points out the problem with division when he states that "a community of God divided and subdivided against itself is all too blatantly a self-contradiction".¹³ Neil Xavier O'Donoghue elaborates on this idea in his article "The Shape of the History of the Eucharist". O'Donoghue asks: "do we understand the early church as a varied confederation of divergent tendencies and groups or admit that the first Christians 'had one heart and soul'?"¹⁴ It may, however, not be as simple as an "either or" approach. The New Testament is replete with evidence of disagreements in the Church's thought and life. But the New Testament also shows that the Church enveloped its diversity within *an understood and practiced unity* that was qualitatively different from the fenced divisions of modern Christendom.¹⁵ We know that throughout history that doctrine has developed differently within communities, but what we need to determine is: "to what degree is growth and development acceptable in the midst of the church, who have been called by Christ to maintain unity?"

In order to further deal with this challenging question, it might be helpful to address another question, especially as it relates to the Eucharist. Does the "shape" of how it is celebrated bring meaning? Or can the meaning of the sacrament that Christ instituted transcend "shape"? Our goal in the following section is *not* to simply understand what the most accurate form of the Eucharist celebration was and therefore should now be. But rather, our goal is to understand first,

¹³ Calhoun, "The Role of Historical Theology," 453.

¹⁴ Neil Xavier O'Donoghue, "The Shape of the History of the Eucharist," *New Blackfriars* 93, no. 1043 (2012): 79, <https://ezproxy.nyack.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.43251597&site=eds-live>.

¹⁵ Christopherson, "Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again: The Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry Document," 365-366.

"why" Christ instituted this sacred meal. In order to do this, next we will review and discuss what the Eucharist is through an examination of both ancient worship practice and the New Testament examples of the Eucharist.

Ancient sacrament and worship

The origins of Christian worship are fundamental to the church and doctrine, however in the ancient world, what we now call 'worship' did not exist.¹⁶ One limitation of understanding the significance of ancient Christian worship, is the inherent limitations of words to fully describe what is meant when discussing "worship". Andrew B. McGowan explores this further in *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective*. McGowan points out that Christians of the first century did not have a concept of worship as a distinct from of human activity that distinguished practices from other forms of ritual and obedience.¹⁷ The development of both Christianity and forms of worship and in this case, sacrament, emerged "in and through a variety of controversies and contests".¹⁸ Therefore, one must be careful by simply claiming orthodoxy as a way to understand worship and sacrament, since it cannot be assumed to have been a part of the thought or practice of every earlier group.¹⁹ As it is often said, losers rarely write history.

It is still significant however to consider the Jewish influence of early Christian ritual practice, even though amongst various sects there is not uniformity to how Jews thought and

¹⁶ Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 5, <https://ezproxy.nyack.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=863475&site=eds-live>.

¹⁷ McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective*, 7.

¹⁸ McGowan, 14.

¹⁹ McGowan, 14.

practiced worship.²⁰ To further complicate matters, there is also no discernable uniformity to either description or prescription present within in the New Testament passages that discuss this sacred meal. Even though what we are able to study can be complicated for how we understand the Eucharist, exploring both Jewish influence and New Testament examples, will help us have a fuller understanding surrounding the discussion at large around how each of these helps to shed light on possible interpretations of both meaning and practice. The following is a presentation of these perspectives and a discussion for how they each significantly contribute to our overall understanding of the meaning of the Eucharist that was born out of this time.

Jewish influence on the Eucharist

William R. Crockett in his book, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation*, states that "in Jewish practice, a common meal binds those who share in it in a table fellowship and that this table fellowship is always understood as an expression of Israelite faith".²¹ While Crockett's assertion should caution the reader to wonder if the use of "always" can be truly known, the use of the word at the same time can inform of the significance present during the participation in a common Jewish meal. Ralph N. McMichael adds, from his book *Eucharist: A Guide for the Perplexed*, that the Eucharist tradition emerged from the Jewish liturgical tradition.²² Meaning that because of the Jewish heritage of meal significance, the institution of the Lord's Supper would have both expected and emphasized blessing and thanksgiving within their meal gathering.

²⁰ McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective*, 11.

²¹ William R. Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017), 17, <https://ezproxy.nyack.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1512485&site=eds-live>.

²² Ralph N. McMichael, *Eucharist: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 12, <https://ezproxy.nyack.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=344053&site=eds-live>.

Many scholars link this meal to understand it through the lens of the Passover meal. The Gospel of Matthew offers that the Lord's Supper happened on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.²³ There is no clear evidence that this was in fact celebrated as a Passover meal. It's not to say, however, that because it was either near/or on Passover that those present wouldn't have been thinking in this way. This speculative significance requires further examination of just what the nearness of Passover might have meant for this meal.

In *To the Cross*, author Christopher J. H. Wright explains that Passover inscribed a festival of remembrance for the Jewish people, particularly of God's deliverance from slavery.²⁴ Wright goes on to explain that this was a celebration meal that emphasized God's character and covenant, the blood of the lamb, and hope and future since the Israelites felt that they were still in captivity as that time and that exile had not yet ended.²⁵ The potential influence of Passover on the event Lord's Supper could have contributed to the disciples having a mentality of both looking back with remembrance and thinking forward for future deliverance. Wright concludes that the significance at play here is the fact that Jesus is saying 'I am the new Passover' and 'I am the new Exodus', and that his future work on the cross could be come to be understood as the fulfilment of Exodus 24.²⁶ This is not just important for understanding how this meal further defines covenant and redemption, but also contributes to the motif of remembrance.

William Crockett asserts that such a Passover like feast is a formula for remembrance, not that Israel remembers Yahweh, but that Yahweh remembers Israel.²⁷ Crockett goes on to break down the Hebrew verb *zkr* ("remember"), which serves not only as a link to the past work

²³ Matthew 26:17 NIV

²⁴ Christopher J. H. Wright, *To the Cross* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 18.

²⁵ Wright, 18.

²⁶ Wright, 23.

²⁷ Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation*, 21.

of Yahweh, but also to God's future promise, which is a way of "actualization". Further demonstrating how this meal's connection to the Passover meal gives a multidimensional benefit to celebrating the meal today, one way being that Christians can participate here and now in its redemptive reality.²⁸ How then are we to understand the elements themselves?

Since the first followers of Jesus drew from their Jewish heritage to formulate and understand this ritual, then the Jewish notions of purity, eschatology, covenant, and sacrifice would have informed the creation of the rite itself.²⁹ Early church doctrine of the Eucharist developed later to include much debate as to whether or not the elements themselves became Jesus's actual flesh and blood. The Eucharist, which was originally a Jewish meal that emerged from the same world of Jewish understanding, continued to develop alongside it rather than merely out of it.³⁰ Therefore, it is important to note that "from a Jewish standpoint, consuming someone's flesh and blood would be cannibalistic and therefore forbidden".³¹ To explore this further we must also discuss that the elements themselves still had and still have a great amount of significance today.

In the Eucharist meal recorded in the New Testament, the elements of bread and wine were present. These being precisely the elements ancient eaters would have expected for everyday fare.³² Andrew McGowan describes ancient food staples like wine and meat as being both common while also possessing religious significance.³³ Nicholas Perrin discusses the

²⁸ Crockett, 26.

²⁹ Isaac W. Oliver, "Baptism and Eucharist," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. 2nd ed, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 677.

³⁰ McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective*, 23.

³¹ Oliver, "Baptism and Eucharist," 677.

³² McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective*, 41.

³³ McGowan, 23.

significance of bread as a sacrament in ancient worship in *Sacraments and Sacramentality in the New Testament*. Perrin notes the significance of Jesus' use of bread might have signified the morsal of bread which was set aside for the expected Messiah, a ritual his Jewish audience would be familiar with.³⁴ Perrin goes on to suggest that the element of bread used in the meal is a signal of the New Exodus movement and a proclamation of Jesus as Messiah.³⁵

In an exploration of other ancient texts, McGowan points out how sometimes food other than bread is to celebrate the Eucharist. He notes that in the Acts of Judas Thomas that bread, oil, vegetables, and salt as blessed and as shared in an unmistakably Eucharistic style.³⁶ Although this fact alone cannot support whether this type of celebration is exactly what Jesus' intended when he instituted the meal, it does illuminate that there again is variance at this time for how this meal was observed and celebrated. Some contend that variance is simply a departure from orthodoxy, and that studying the Eucharist requires acknowledging providence and the work of the Holy Spirit in the history of the church and its development of this doctrine.³⁷

I however would acknowledge the importance of protecting our understanding of the Eucharist from being open to interpretation, however, to think of it in singular terms is to truly limit the full scope of beauty and opportunity that lies within this significant celebration meal. Since the Eucharist came within the context of ancient worship practice and understanding, our focus on understanding it within this context allows us to better grasp the significance this meal had for its original audience. Our goal is to discover meaning before we can understand the

³⁴ Nicholas Perrin, *Sacraments and Sacramentality in the New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 2015): 54,
<https://ezproxy.nyack.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsoho&AN=edsoho.9780199659067.013.28&site=eds-live>.

³⁵ Perrin, *Sacraments and Sacramentality in the New Testament*, 54.

³⁶ McGowan, 42.

³⁷ O'Donoghue, "The Shape of the History of the Eucharist," 71.

practice of the Eucharist. In order to do this, next we will study several New Testament passages and their significance to helping us further unpack the possible meaning of this meal.

New Testament evidence of Eucharist meaning

Meals were an important focus of Jesus' ministry. Therefore, The Last Supper should, as the New Testament writers intended it, cause a thoughtful consideration of the meaning it had for its participants. However, the goal is not simply to understand in order to memorialize this specific meal, but rather through understanding the wider meal tradition and custom, we can gain insight into how the significance of this meal can be translated into how this meal is to be understood and practiced today.

In 1 Corinthians 11, we see the first mention of a New Testament Eucharistic meal. From this chapter, it is significant to point out that the meal was not individual, but rather communal. Crockett points out that "sharing sacred food created a community of faith".³⁸ The practice of a communal Eucharist meal was therefore a part of creating and sustaining a community of faith for the early church.

Martin Lloyd-Jones writes in his book *Authentic Christianity* that "their communion was at a heart level, not theological".³⁹ Lloyd-Jones goes on to suggest that Jesus commanded this meal as a way to preserve the unity of the church, and that unity is only possible when the focus of the communion table is Christ.⁴⁰ What did this meal mean to original believers? Lloyd-Jones argues that Christ gave the meal for the sake of every believer. At this time ordinary people were being persecuted, experiencing sickness, hardship, and possibly mental illness. Since this is the case, when they broke bread, they could simply remember not only what Jesus had done, but

³⁸ Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation*, 32.

³⁹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Authentic Christianity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 148.

⁴⁰ Lloyd-Jones, *Authentic Christianity*, 150-151.

what he was still going to do and "lift their weary heads".⁴¹ Have we then over theologized a meal that was simply meant for every person, not just scholars and intellectuals? What might be more than just a simple meal, should not overshadow the beauty that celebrating it had on unifying a community of believers to remember and look forward to Christ's work with thanksgiving in the midst of hardship. This meal might be both simple and dynamic, therefore the following is a more in depth look at how this meal was significant in what it represented.

One significant element of this meal is the presence and purpose of "table fellowship". In Jesus' time on earth his fellowship meals with people points not only to what is present, but what is to come. Crockett suggests that "table fellowship with Jesus during the public ministry was a visible sign of the dawning of the future reign of God".⁴² The disciples were often expectant and longed for the Messiah to establish his new kingdom. It therefore would have been likely on their minds at the Last Supper, while they were experiencing fellowship with Jesus over a meal, what future meals might be like in Jesus' new kingdom. Additionally, Jews in the New Testament were still covenant minded people, so it is important to again explore the significance of their understanding of the covenant and how they might have affected how they understood and experienced this meal.

Nicholas Perrin explores the Gospels and Acts in his book *Sacraments and Sacramentality in the New Testament* to attempt to better understand how the original audience experienced this meal. One way he sets out to do this is through exploring just how the synoptic writers attempted to convey this meal in their writings. Perrin asserts that there is "little doubt that the synoptic evangelists intended to convey the supper as a Passover meal".⁴³ Perrin goes on

⁴¹ Lloyd-Jones, 157.

⁴² Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation*, 10.

⁴³ Perrin, *Sacraments and Sacramentality in the New Testament*, 53.

to say that the synoptic writer's tendency is to "present Jesus as the Moses-like catalyst for the New Exodus" which supports the conclusion that "the early church had from a very early point understood the Eucharist as a recapitulation of Israel's redemptive event par excellence".⁴⁴ The significance of this meal at the time of its institution then, was that it was a communal meal, meant to unify those who were partaking together, in which Jesus "set the cross and the table into a mutually interpretive relationship, all while retaining both a prospective (eschatological) and retrospective (redemptive-historical) aspect".⁴⁵

We see in the later work of Corinthians that the church was struggling in both understanding and practice of this meal. The believers at Corinth were failing to wait for one another before partaking and neglecting to ensure proper portions were gathered for participants, which had the consequence of "reinforcing hierarchical social divisions, socio-economic divisions in particular".⁴⁶ In 1 Corinthians 11:25, Paul describes this meal as the "new covenant", regarding it as a "unique ongoing public marker of one's inclusion in and commitment to Christ", which symbolized the believer's inclusion in the one body of Christ.⁴⁷ Which is why he exhorts the Corinthians to not eat this meal in an irreverent and self-centered manner. Paul asserts that this meal was integral part of *kerygma*, meant to be proclaimed by the believing community, and therefore it was significant that doing so together was representative of the type of new covenant that it was. As Paul later writes in Galatians 3:28, under Christ, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus".⁴⁸ The new covenant established through Christ meant unity that would transcend social, ethnic, gender, and

⁴⁴ Perrin, 53.

⁴⁵ Perrin, 53.

⁴⁶ Perrin, 56.

⁴⁷ Perrin, 57.

⁴⁸ Galatians 3:23 NIV

economic differences. Therefore, to Paul's point, understanding the significance of this covenant meal should be reverently represented in practice so that there aren't any divisions.

Since Paul wrote these words, however, there has been no shortage of struggle for interpreting both the meaning and method for practicing such a meal. What we know is that there are various meal traditions in both the New Testament and early Christian literature that make understanding the origins of the Eucharist complex.⁴⁹ The complexity has caused much debate over the years. The following is a summary of how from early church had come to define and celebrate the Eucharist and how the doctrine of the Eucharist has historically been formed.

The historical development of the doctrine of the Eucharist

It is trite but still necessary to insist that one of our major tasks is to combine for our time the full depth of traditional Christian insight and the breadth of modern knowledge.⁵⁰ The development of Christian doctrine is, by its very nature as thought but as churchly thought, bound simultaneously to each of the particular cultural situations within which men have reflected on the Christian message and to the successions within which these men have stood.⁵¹ One must understand the fullness of what is happening at the time when doctrine is developed to better understand the nature of the doctrine itself. It is difficult to have a proper historical recounting of doctrine development without some presupposition encroaching on how history is recounted. Church history is always more than the history of doctrine, but it should not be less.⁵²

⁴⁹ Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation*, 8.

⁵⁰ Calhoun, "The Role of Historical Theology," 451.

⁵¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, "An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine," *Church History* 35, no.1(1966): 7, <https://search-ebcsohost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0000695558&site=eds-live>.

⁵² Pelikan, "An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine," 11.

The following is a summary of the historical development of the doctrine of the Eucharist, without the full exploration of the cultural influences present at the time. The sake of this summary is not an exhaustive representation of the details of the development, but rather to point to how different traditions have developed doctrinal understanding over time. To better understand the theological significance of this doctrine's development, the following will not be satisfactory, and a more in-depth study will be necessary if you are not already familiar with the different theologies of the Eucharist.

The church has always celebrated the Lord's Supper, yet over time, it has come to understand the nature of it differently, which has led to various ways of administering the celebration. The early church first distinguished who could participate in the celebration by preventing anyone who had not been baptized from receiving the elements, stating that baptism was the first right, and the eucharist is the ongoing right of the believer.⁵³ The *Didache*, our earliest glimpse into its Christian celebration, made the case that the Lord's Supper is a celebration fulfilling Malachi 1:11, recognizing it as a sacrifice given, resting on the belief that the reality of the presence of Christ is in the Eucharist.⁵⁴ The early church community was striving to preserve their distinct identity. Although it is unclear just how the food of their Eucharist became 'holy', it was set apart from regular use or from being shared outside the circle of believers.⁵⁵ Justin Martyr outlines further details of how to celebrate this meal, that Clement and Irenaeus later expand on.⁵⁶ Augustine contributed that Christ himself is the host of the table, administering the grace, which invites the church to live in unity, and as they partake, they both

⁵³ Gregg Allison, *Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 635.

⁵⁴ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 638.

⁵⁵ McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective*, 44.

⁵⁶ O'Donoghue, "The Shape of the History of the Eucharist," 72.

welcome Christ in them, and dwell also within Christ.⁵⁷ Because of the vulnerability of doctrine and theology of being misinterpreted or misapplied, it can be assumed that these early church fathers were attempting to give shape to the Eucharist celebration to protect it from being open to interpretation. In addition to that, they sought to understand the meaning of this meal to enrich the worship of the early church.

In the Middle Ages the discussion turned to examine further the nature of the “presence” in the Eucharist. Several theories emerged attempted to explaining how the elements become the body and blood of Christ. Aquinas used Aristotle's definition of “substance” and “accident”, which was later further defined at the Fourth Lateran Council as “transubstantiation”, which the church affirmed.⁵⁸ This view, however, was challenged by those who were critical of their observations of the church’s power and practice. John Wycliffe was one of the first to oppose this view of the Eucharist, later followed by Martin Luther during the Reformation. Collectively they attacked the issues of the idolatry of the bread, absolute power claimed by the priests to transform and selectively administer, and the misuse of Aristotelian philosophy.⁵⁹ Luther had also objected to "indulgences" being sold by the church, stating that both Scripture and clear reason have ultimate authority, rather than the pope or councils who are fallible and have often erred or contradicted themselves.⁶⁰ This opened the door for new interpretation on the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper.

⁵⁷ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 640-641.

⁵⁸ Allison, 644.

⁵⁹ Allison, 646-647.

⁶⁰ William C. Placher and Derek R. Nelson, *Readings in the History of Christian Theology, Volume 2, Revised Edition: From the Reformation to the Present* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 1, <https://ezproxy.nyack.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1490859&site=eds-live>.

Martin Luther claimed that the supper was not a sacrifice, rather a promise received, and that Christ's body was present "in, with, and under" the substance of the bread, positing the idea of consubstantiation.⁶¹ Huldrych Zwingli suggested that according to John 6:63, that Christ was not literally referring to his flesh and blood, contributing that communion is a commemorative act or memorial oath for the believer.⁶² John Calvin contributing his own idea that the elements weren't empty symbols, but that through Christ's spiritual presence in them, they nourish the Christian faith as suggested in John 6.⁶³ Lastly the Baptists in the post-Reformation described the Lord's Supper as an "external sign" of the communion of Christ and his faithful.⁶⁴ The Catholic Church, at the Council of Trent, maintained that the real presence of Christ is in the elements, and are offered in the Mass as a bloodless sacrifice.⁶⁵

As the Reformation spread, Luther and Zwingli tried to keep the church together, however there were others who wanted a more purified church of the truly committed, even if it meant founding small, separated communities.⁶⁶ Most Christians are unaware that Luther and Calvin (not to mention most of the less-known church leaders of the sixteenth century, both Protestant and Catholic) continued ceaseless efforts all their lives, through writings as well as joint meetings, to heal the growing rifts.⁶⁷ However, as we are well aware, their efforts could not prevent the eventual largest and still most current rift the church has ever experienced. As

⁶¹ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 649.

⁶² Allison, 650.

⁶³ Allison, 653.

⁶⁴ Allison, 656.

⁶⁵ Allison, 655.

⁶⁶ Placher, *Readings in the History of Christian Theology, Volume 2, Revised Edition: From the Reformation to the Present*, 2.

⁶⁷ Christopherson, "Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again: The Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry Document," 364.

Charles Clayton Morrison once put it, “The right of private interpretation [among Protestants] came to mean the right to establish separatist churches upon the private interpretation.”⁶⁸

The Reformation focused on teaching and exhortation, and sacramental liturgy took the backseat in worship services. Luther being one who "promoted word first, asserting one could do without the sacrament, and therefore Protestants to follow came to "came to experience the word, rather than the sacrament as the normal means by which Christian faith and life are nourished".⁶⁹ Therefore, we observe the development of doctrinal understanding and emphasis of the Eucharist ceasing for a significant period in the life of the Protestant church.

More recently there has been a resurgence of ecumenical efforts and achievements. The ecumenical movement even found intense adhesion on American soil.⁷⁰ However, despite these efforts, our Eucharist landscape is still diverse and fragmented in many ways.⁷¹ A large ecumenical movement known as *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (BEM)*, sought to address the historically separated church through an attempt to settle the disputed disagreements. Many historians have seen the twentieth century ecumenical movement as the greatest religious event of world history since the sixteenth-century Reformation and perhaps since Constantine.⁷² *BEM* is the greatest, most promising theological document to come out of the ecumenical movement.⁷³ Though the efforts of BEM mark an important milestone, unfortunately the effect has been slow

⁶⁸ Christopherson, 365.

⁶⁹ Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation*, 175.

⁷⁰ Luigi Giussani and Damian Bacich, *American Protestant Theology: A Historical Sketch* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 135, <https://ezproxy.nyack.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=594579&site=eds-live>.

⁷¹ McMichael, *Eucharist: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 1.

⁷² Christopherson, 364.

⁷³ Christopherson, "Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again: The Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry Document," 365.

and still require a great deal of attention in order to affect how the church identifies itself in unity around the communion table.

One large contribution of BEM sought to illuminate the benefits of this sacramental meal by stating that regardless of how it is celebrated the Eucharist is a sign of God's love, through Christ and is central to the church's worship. The meal invites giving thanks to the Father, memorializing Jesus, invoking the Holy Spirit, partaking together as the faithful, unifying the church both today and representing the meal of the kingdom to come.⁷⁴ The following is a further discussion of BEM and how a variety of traditions of perspectives have either embraced these efforts or remain cautiously optimistic that greater unity can be achieved around the Lord's Table.

Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry

BEM came from the World Council of Churches, which is made up of more than 300 member churches seeking to realize the goal of visible church unity.⁷⁵ Seeking to address the years of doctrinal division, this council sought to thoughtfully spend a half a century studying and writing in three main areas that the church could achieve greater unity. This came from the realization of the question: "how was the church to call for the unity of the human community, and to carry out its mission to the world with conviction, when it is so visibly divided on these fundamentals of belief and practice?"⁷⁶ The WCC Faith and Order Commission produced the first BEM document in Lima, Peru in 1982. What happened in the BEM experience became a paradigm of the con-stitutional purpose of Faith and Order: to serve the

⁷⁴ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 658.

⁷⁵ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Unity and Mission: The Emerging Ecumenical Vision," *Ecumenical Review* 39, no. 3(1987): 337, <https://doi:10.1111/j.1758-6623.1987.tb01424.x>.

⁷⁶ Oduyoye, "Unity and Mission: The Emerging Ecumenical Vision," 339.

churches as they “call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe”; in short: renewal.⁷⁷ Since then, BEM has been a challenge to the churches to take the causes of their division seriously, to analyze them, to separate the fundamental issues from the peripheral ones that have accrued over the years, and to ask: "How much diversity is tolerable within the unity which is God's gift to us?"⁷⁸

To better understand how different traditions are either understanding, or embracing the work of BEM, I am including a review several articles, which I will summarize below. The first article is: “Baptism and the Eucharist in BEM and Wider Ecumenical Conversation: An Anglican Perspective”, by Martin Davie. Davie’s article seems to suggest that he believes that convergence is possible and has already partially happened. He makes the case that BEM provides the Church with an important foundation to build on and that the third assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi gives the Church their ecumenical goal that should be the driving force to keep building.⁷⁹ However, eager to work towards unity, I believe that Davie fails to talk about what it might take to be able to continue to work towards unity.

The next article is "Presbyterians and the eucharist", written by George Stroup. Stroup’s article follows Davie’s BEM review through his Reformed lens focusing specifically on the Eucharist. He is humble to admit his denominations lost way regarding the Lord’s Super and

⁷⁷ John St H. Gibaut, "The Church: Towards a Common Vision: Faith and Order and the Renewal of the Churches" *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 7, no. 1 (2015): 135-136, <https://doi:10.1515/ress-2015-0008>.

⁷⁸ Oduyoye, 339.

⁷⁹ Davie Martin, "Baptism and the Eucharist in BEM and Wider Ecumenical Conversation: an Anglican Perspective," *One in Christ* 47, no. 1 (2013), <https://ezproxy.nyack.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=89419679&site=eds-live>.

finds beauty in BEM's contents regarding how they define the celebration and purpose of the Eucharist.⁸⁰ However, considering the good, Stroup is also able hold it in tension with his tradition's specific convictions. He is protective to keep and defend the elements of the Eucharist that BEM failed to address or explicitly define. To Stroup, BEM could be considered an appetizer; something that brings nourishment but doesn't contain all the nutrients necessary to sustain a healthy person in the worship practice of the Lord's Supper.

The last article is "Toward One Baptism: The Discussions on Mutual Recognition of Baptism in an International Perspective", by Dagmar Hellyer. Heller builds on the discussion with a further review of BEM through a specific examination of baptism. He contributes his knowledge and understanding of BEM as an executive secretary for the Faith and order at the World Council of Churches in Geneva. It's almost as if we are getting an insider's perspective on BEM from the very place that crafted it. Heller considers BEM as more of a snack, something to sharpen the appetite for more but is nutritionally deficient. His assertion is that in order to achieve "one in Christ" in our doctrinal differences, one must be willing not to simplify church doctrine into limiting simplistic statements, but rather be willing to feature the uniqueness of each in a robust explanation of each, as a celebration of the complexity of what "one in Christ" most fully means.⁸¹

There have been a variety of responses reflected, but that only captures a fraction of the larger discussion around the efforts of BEM and ecumenical efforts in general. Raising the question why is it that churches are responding in different ways to an effort that should all be a

⁸⁰ George W. Stroup, "Presbyterians and the eucharist," *Austin Seminary Bulletin (Faculty ed.)* 100, no. 4(1984), <https://ezproxy.nyack.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0000926759&site=eds-live>.

⁸¹ Dagmar Hellyer, "Toward One Baptism: The Discussions on Mutual Recognition of Baptism in an International Perspective," *The Ecumenical Review* 67, no. 3 (2015), <https://doi:10.1111/erev.12169>.

priority of the church? Sandra Beardsall in her article: "It Takes a Village: Can The Church: Towards a Common Vision Help Raise North American Ecumenists?", address some to the complexities that the church has faced since the drafting of BEM.

Beardsall states that many church leaders are "exhausted, anxious for their own futures in ministry, and unable to open themselves to the complexities of interde-nominational sharing. They have learned one operating system, as Gibaut puts it, and do not have the energy to risk learning another."⁸² She goes on to express that church leaders often respond to these types of efforts with a "been there, done that" attitude, opting instead to be content with a cordial relationship with those outside of their tradition. Beardsall pushes back against this response by quoting the Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity, stating that "friendly division is still division."⁸³ Beardsall goes on to express another frustration with church's lack of desire to respond to these efforts. She contends that many churches today are making serious marketing efforts to distinguish themselves as unique and attractive to the outsider. So much so, that they are moving away from unity, worrying that it might undermine diversity or enforce uniformity. She provides a corrective word for those who are struggling in this area by reminding us that we need to dedicate ample time to discern "legitimate" from "divisive" diversity.⁸⁴

The ecumenical movement is an invitation to become more fully what we already are. It is an invitation to receive one another as Christ has received us; to make visible our unity or

⁸² Sandra Beardsall, "It Takes a Village: Can The Church: Towards a Common Vision Help Raise North American Ecumenists?," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 50, no. 2 (2015): 258, <https://ezproxy.nyack.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLAn3838768&site=eds-live>.

⁸³ Beardsall, "It Takes a Village: Can The Church: Towards a Common Vision Help Raise North American Ecumenists?," 259.

⁸⁴ Beardsall, "It Takes a Village: Can The Church: Towards a Common Vision Help Raise North American Ecumenists?," 262.

communion which is already given.⁸⁵ A simple and compelling call, that is not easily addressed in the face of what historically has brought us to where we are today: a church divided. Kenneth E. Christopherson addresses this in his article "Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again: The Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry Document". Christopherson addresses that what we have is a bit like humpty dumpty, but it may not be as complex as we make it.

He states that:

Jaroslav Pelikan, now finishing his magisterial five-volume history of Christian doctrine, once said the project had made him ask whether there was any one doctrine that had provided the red thread of Christianity's continuity through twenty centuries. He could not find unbroken continuity in any one doctrine. But then he came to realize that no week of Christian history had gone by without celebration of the Eucharist, and no day since Jesus had passed without Christians praying the Our Father. Christian continuity had consisted in their *worship*.⁸⁶

The celebration of the Eucharist is part of our historical worship of the church. Could it be then that the ground to gain is not on theological consensus but on the ability to converge. As we learn to put our swords down, and value one another, are we perhaps ushering in a new age of collective unity that will enable us to work more effectively to bringing the Kingdom of God to earth, and preparing the earth for Christ's return? Without abandoning the distinctness of our faith, is it possible that we don't need more "solid" theology, but instead what Hellyer describes as a robust explanation /celebration of the complexity of "one in Christ" truly means? This experience of recognizing oneself in the other is at the heart of ecumenism, and the goal of reception.⁸⁷ The Orthodox Church reminds us that the Church as body of Christ cannot be

⁸⁵ Gibaut, "The Church: Towards a Common Vision: Faith and Order and the Renewal of the Churches," 142.

⁸⁶ Christopherson, "Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again: The Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry Document," 366.

⁸⁷ Gibaut, "The Church: Towards a Common Vision: Faith and Order and the Renewal of the Churches" 148.

“reformed’, but it certainly is continuously renewed by the Holy Spirit.⁸⁸ I think it's time that the Church embraces the greater work of the Holy Spirit in our understandings of the doctrine of the Eucharist to bring a greater and much needed renewal.

Is greater unity around the Lord's Table possible?

The prayer of Jesus in John 17 rings in my head and heart: "I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one-as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me".⁸⁹ Our job as believers is not to create communion, but rather to live in it. And the outcome when we do is a powerful witness to the world. Neglecting this opportunity is forsaking not just the witness of Christ to the world, but to our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ to experience the unity of the Trinity within our fellowship on earth. The enemy has always divided what posed the largest threat to the establishment of his kingdom. It should be no surprise to us that where we see a great amount of disunity in the church today is a scheme to distract us from the power that lies within our unity.

Jesus explains to his disciples that he "did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many".⁹⁰ Beardsall recounts the following to remind us the way in which we can experience unity:

At the 2013 meeting of the NAAE, Bishop Demetrios of Mokissos told us, as he reflected on the icon of Peter and Paul embracing: “We will not embrace ... one another ... due to agreements on paper, through the intellectual exchange of words . . . , and academically. We can only conquer death and ‘work out our salvation’... in our mutual effort to serve one another. Doctrine divides: service unites,” said the old slogan.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Gibaut, 136.

⁸⁹ John 17:21 NLT

⁹⁰ Matthew 20:28 NIV

⁹¹ Beardsall, "It Takes a Village: Can The Church: Towards a Common Vision Help Raise North American Ecumenists?," 255.

Unity, as Jesus reminds us also comes with a cost. There is going to have to be a laying down of ourselves. Which might involve our willingness to really examine the historical landscape and how we have come to understand our Eucharist celebration tradition. It might mean entering the conversation at large, willing to wade into the theological particulars, to try to better understand better where others are coming from. It might even require a surrender of a posture of doctrinal pride. The cost for The Church might involve a willingness to "try again" even though the last time not much happened when unity was attempted. It also might mean that The Church lays down some time that is being spent on itself, to consider moving towards others outside their tradition. Nothing to prove, nothing to protect, nothing to promote.

The Greek word *koinonia*, often translated as "communion", is preferred in ecumenical ecclesiology because it derives from the verb meaning, "to have something in common," "to share," "to participate," "to have part in" or "to act together," or "to be in contractual relationship involving obligations of mutual accountability".⁹² Each traditional has something to give to our understanding of the significance of this meal, as BEM has helpfully summarized. Each individual church may [be] strumming only its own string, neglecting the fulness of the biblical harmony.⁹³ Paying attention to this is to see with greater clarity the fullness of the beauty of the Eucharist which will encourage a richer experience in practice and worship and bring greater unity to Christ's church. I believe there is more work to be done, and it is possible. May we respond with urgency to the opportunity to go further in together so that we as Christ's church can go further on.

⁹² Gibaut, "The Church: Towards a Common Vision: Faith and Order and the Renewal of the Churches" 137.

⁹³ Christopherson, "Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again: The Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry Document," 370.

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