



Reviews



Making a Meal of It: Rethinking the Theology of the Lord's Supper, Ben Witherington III, Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007, pp. xi, 160, ISBN 978-1-60258-015-2. £16.99

Over two millennia ago, the Greek pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides formulated his ontology of permanence: 'What exists is now, all at once and continuous'. Even in the present age the Christian tradition is often predisposed towards an attitude of changelessness; it is, after all, Christian *tradition*, and tradition is reliant upon some concept of continuity. From the timeless doctrines of the Church through to the more domicile practicalities of day-to-day Church life, it would take an imprudent person to brashly criticise the accepted norms within the ecclesia.

However, in the newest offering from his trilogy on the sacraments, Ben Witherington counters this attitude of religious immovability with the revolutionary cry of 'Change!' *Making a Meal of It*, the second book in the trilogy, focuses its discussion upon the Christian sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Witherington's task is definite: 'Christians today have widely divergent views of the Lord's Supper and what happens when one takes it. To some degree this is because we have all moved a considerable distance from what the New Testament actually says about the Lord's Supper.' (xi) As far as Witherington is concerned, there is need for change in contemporary Eucharistic practice, but that change does not originate *ab ovo* from within the present day ecclesiastical milieu but rather *ad fontes* by a return to the New Testament texts and the contexts out of which they emerge.

The book broadly divides into two main parts, the second being considerably shorter than the first: in the first part, Witherington takes us on a detailed meandering through the various texts, both biblical and extra-biblical, which directly affect the practice of the Lord's Supper; in the second section, this historical excursion is interpreted

and a number of key facets drawn out so as to give direction to contemporary celebration of the Lord's Supper, an attempt to 'go back over the fields and pick up the leftover fragments.' (129)

The course plotted throughout the first section of the book, the first seven chapters, is roughly chronological. After locating the Lord's Supper firmly within its social context, highlighting the celebratory meal-status of the Eucharist, Witherington begins his historical discursive in the gospels, working through the Jewish meal tradition of Passover, before turning his focus upon the accounts of the Last Supper in the synoptics and, subsequently, the elusive passage in John's gospel which touches on the Lord's Supper. Following on from here, the influence of Greco-Roman culture upon the early church is explored through the texts of 1 Corinthians, the accounts of table fellowship in the Acts of the Apostles, and the early writings of Fathers into the second century. Witherington closes the section with a brief analysis of the eventual development of the Supper into the Mass and the subsequent reaction against it by the various Reformation factions in the Church. As he crafts his tale, the author provides the various texts which document the development of the Lord's Supper through the ages which proves a useful resource as it creates a versatile anthology of Eucharistic texts from within the New Testament and the various contemporaneous writers. However, although this part of the book follows a broadly sequential path, Witherington does not simply restrict himself to a chronological narrative. Along the way he takes the time to focus on those topics pertinent to his wider undertaking, topics such as the relationship between Passover, the Last Supper and the consequent Eucharistic celebrations; the identity of the Beloved Disciple; the findings of the social historians on the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman attitudes towards meal culture. Overall, the first section of the book offers a comprehensive introduction to the underlying factors surrounding the development of the Lord's Supper.

From this historical basis, Witherington moves into the second section of the book, teasing out a number of pieces within his narrative as he seeks to reactualise the celebration of the Eucharist in the present day. His concerns are twofold: firstly, the focus of the Lord's Supper has

to be upon Jesus Christ; secondly, the meal-character of the Lord's Supper is too often overlooked. In analysing the Supper in its original contexts, Witherington differentiates between the celebration of the Eucharist, the Passover meal and the Last Supper. The emphasis of the Lord's Supper is not upon 'the night Jesus was betrayed' but rather upon 'the Lord's death'; whilst the liturgy begins with a reference to the night of Jesus' betrayal, the emphasis swiftly moves to the death of Christ upon the cross and its subsequent benefit for believers. In this way, the Lord's Supper is not a re-enactment but rather an *anamnesis*, a remembrance, in which the participants look back to the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ and his future return. 'The focus of the original Lord's Supper is *not on the elements* in the present or the present in general, but on Christ and what he did and what he will do.' (130) Whilst Christ is the centre of the Eucharist, the mode of the Supper is undeniably the very fact that it is a meal, a meal not simply between church members, but a meal at which Jesus himself is present: 'This is *our occasion to share a meal with Jesus*. He is the unseen host of this meal.' (133) The very meal-character of the Lord's Supper is important; Jesus did not institute an esoteric ritual or magical ceremony but a meal, that activity which lies at the heart of human subsistence. In this way the Supper emphasises Christian hospitality, the notion of equality, the solidarity of the body of Christ in the 'one loaf'.

Making a Meal of It is an ambitious book. In its mere 160 pages it covers 1,600 years of the history of the Lord's Supper before attempting to revive the original *raison d'être* of the celebratory meal. As an historical starting-point, the book is a useful resource for both the pastor and the layperson alike; the texts are anthologised and exegeted very helpfully. In terms of his assessment of the present situation, Witherington suffers from his own desire for brevity. He retains a mere eighteen pages with which to complete the task and the flow of his argument is often stilted as he seeks to cover as much area as possible. He also betrays a number of subtle contradictions; for example, he is clear that the focus of the Supper is not on its various particularities but on Christ, there is no re-enactment but simply *anamnesis*, but he still argues that both the bread and the wine used should correspond to those used in the original meal. This lack

of continuity between the form and the content of the Lord's Supper seems to leave aspects of his practical arguments *ad hominem* as he merely emphasises his own preferences. Furthermore, with his constant declaration that the Supper looks forwards and backwards, seldom if ever to the present, Witherington's reactualisation of the Supper seems to lack a synchronic anchor. Witherington seems to forget the kerygmatic injunction in Paul's claim that '*We proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*'. The Eucharist gives the Church its identity, an identity founded upon the past in Christ's death, looking forwards to his immanent return, but an identity which locates the Church in *the here and now*. However, *ceteris paribus*, the book is a giant step in the right direction, highlighting the great need for a contemporary reappraisal of the Eucharist within the Church of the twenty-first century.

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The Weakest Link and Other Sermons on the Lord's Supper,
Ian MacLeod, Guildford: Grosvenor House Publishing,
2007, pp. 128, ISBN 978-1-906210-56-4. £8.99

Ian MacLeod will be a name that is well known to many parish ministers in the Church of Scotland due to his editing of several books of talks to children – relieving much pressure in many a manse late on a Saturday evening. Here, he displays his expertise and interest in sacramental theology gleaned through postgraduate and doctoral research at the University of Glasgow, but also from the distilled wisdom of a long and active preaching career in pastoral ministry. It is a book of sermons and has both the advantages and disadvantages of such books. The advantages are that it is immediately accessible, warm, engaging and relevant to the ministerial task. MacLeod does not display his academic research on the sacraments in an obvious or forced way, but it seeps through in his obvious command of the material and the way in which he attempts to get across difficult concepts in understandable ways (cf. “These Powerful Symbols”,