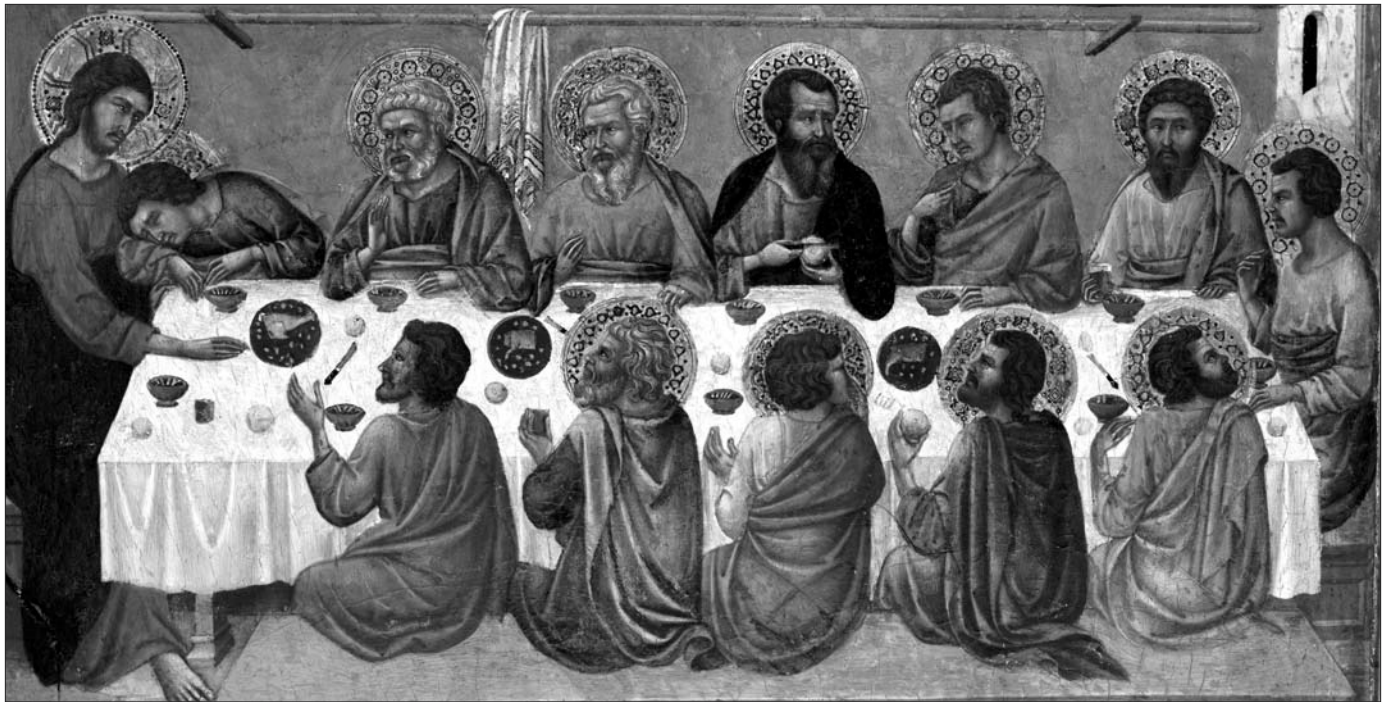


## The Meal and the Mission | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN



UGOLINO DI NERIO (1324-05), THE LAST SUPPER, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

If God calls us to be the Remnant, we can rise above the commonplace and do what seems impossible. This high calling, says the book of Revelation,<sup>1</sup> enables us to live in harmony with the God of Jesus. Jesus lived and preached the seemingly impossible—generosity and compassion, love even for enemies and outsiders, forgiveness even of the unforgivable—and we are meant to make his faith our very own. So the call to be the Remnant is God's offer of truly out-of-the-ordinary existence. By embracing it, we agree to a high mission.

Each time we re-enact the Lord's Supper, we renew that commitment. If we mean what we say and do, we leave the meal re-charged for world-changing witness. But *ordinary* existence, you might well think, is hard enough. We struggle just to make a living or kick our bad habits or smile at the kids in the morning. So how,

really, does the meal help us live so *exalted* a mission? How does it help us find the necessary courage, passion, and resilience?

Food matters. Evicted from your mother's womb, you at first were furious. But then you got invited to dinner, and that made all the difference. And to this day, food in good company lifts spirits. Whenever we share memories—or better, memories and a mission—eating together makes everything more vivid and intense. It's renewing, like an anniversary party where you eat wedding cake again and repeat your marriage vows.

The Lord's Supper is such a meal. When we participate from the heart, it brings vividness and intensity to our Christian experience and helps to reinforce our covenant with Christ.

When Jesus first celebrated this event with the disciples, they had come together for a Passover meal. A

high day in Jewish life, the Passover recalled Israel's deliverance from Egypt. Although the memory was hope-building, the times were difficult. Roman soldiers walked the streets. The authorities were angry with Jesus. There was plenty to worry about.

Gathering for the Lord's Supper, we are likewise a community of hope. And we have reasons for worry too. The world is in crisis, both political and economic; distrust and cynicism are undermining the common good. At the same time, many people are turning a critical eye on religious faith. Atheists claim that religion poisons everything. The media look down on many of our convictions. Too often our friends or, most painfully, our children, keep their distance from church life, or even walk away from it.

Jesus stood for things both good and beautiful. He stood for hope and love. He stood for inclusion and forgiveness. Even his enemies he prayed for. This was his gospel. But when critics today ridicule Jesus' followers, they say that Christians themselves scorn the gospel. Many churchgoers, you remember, resisted the Civil Rights movement. During the 1990s the Rwandan genocide set Christian against Christian. About the same time, in Chechnya, you could hear the Muslim cry "God is great!" coming from the Chechen side, while Russian soldiers yelled back, "Christ is risen!"<sup>2</sup>

"God is great!" / "Christ is risen!"—all in the cause of violence and hatred.

Shortly after World War II, the author Albert Camus, himself an unbeliever, spoke at a monastery in France. He reminded listeners that, in France as in Germany, many churchgoers had cooperated with Hitler. Even "as the executioners multiplied," he said, cooperation continued. Camus was indignant; the church's witness had fallen far short of unmistakable condemnation. What the world needs, he declared, are "Christians who remain Christians."<sup>3</sup>

Christians who remain Christians! Followers who actually follow!

Even Jesus was familiar with disloyalty. By the time of Passover, he knew that one of the twelve was ready to betray him; others in the inner circle were quarreling over position and status. To be sure, Jesus was ready to forgive all of this. But he still wanted the disciples' whole-hearted partnership. He wanted them to walk with him, to make his mission theirs.

So at this Passover meal Jesus interrupted the normal flow. As Matthew tells it, he broke and blessed a loaf of bread, and, asking his friends to eat it, said: *This is my body*. Then he offered them the cup and said: *This is my blood of the covenant*.<sup>4</sup> In taking this bread and this wine into their bodies, they would be taking in Jesus himself, taking Jesus himself into their hearts.

The Reformer John Calvin said that in the bread and wine Christ "becomes completely one with us, and we become one with him."<sup>5</sup> But the meal isn't magic. At the Lord's Table, we may go through the motions without renewing our loyalty to Christ. For any serious worshipper, though, the eating and drinking is a public pledge of union with Christ.

Still, betrayals happen. Too few Christians remain Christians, and critics of faith still abound. Evangelism is hard. Keeping congregations strong is hard. Even staying faithful in our personal lives is hard—our doubts, fears, and hates stick to us, and temptation is everywhere.

At the Passover meal Jesus could have offered a merely verbal reminder: *Listen, people! You know what I stand for*. But his mission was facing difficulty. His friends seemed uncomprehending, not fully engaged. So he offered a physical gesture, something, as Ellen White said, that would awaken their "senses," something they could see and feel.<sup>6</sup> He wanted God's grace, and the mission associated with it, to be *visible*, to be *tangible*. A physical gesture would add force to mere words, the way a handshake does, or a hug.

That meal became ritual, something all Christians would repeat.

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When Paul wrote about the meal to the church at Corinth, difficulty was on his mind, just as it had been on Jesus' mind. Under his leadership, a fledgling Christian community had formed there. After eighteen months, Paul had left for missionary endeavor elsewhere, and now, a few years later, the congregation was rife with lawsuits, sexual sin, and quarrels over doctrine, idols, and food.

So in 1 Corinthians Paul was addressing the fact that many members had failed to remain deeply Christian. In chapter 10, verse 7 he alluded to the feasting that had occurred when Israel bowed the knee to the golden calf. Food had been a way of expressing their feelings about this false god, and he wanted church members to see that the Lord's Supper is likewise a way of expressing feelings—feelings about Christ and the mission of Christ.

Then in verse 16 Paul wrote: *"The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?"* (HCSB). He was saying that by this physical gesture, this taking of bread and wine, we come in touch with—we enter into unity with—the very being of Jesus Christ.

Unity with whom? With the One who challenged every life by his shocking generosity, the One to whom God said, "Sit at my right hand." <sup>77</sup> In devotion to others, Jesus put himself in danger—lived, as you might say, into his own death—so that those he loved might receive "the life which was his."<sup>78</sup> Today when the church gathers for worship, the eating and drinking sharpens our gratitude for this, so that we may determine anew to link our lives with his and make his mission ours. And as with a handshake or hug, we offer more than words as a sign of commitment; we say commitment with our bodies.

What could matter more? So many people are like reality-show contestants—obsessed with themselves and comfortable manipulating others. So many are like worst-case spouses or politicians—weighted down with grudges and reluctant to allow for failure, let alone forgive

the unforgiveable. What is even worse, so many lack hope for something better. In just this context we can, by God's grace, take our stand for the seemingly impossible: for generosity, compassion, wide-reaching love, forgiveness of the unforgiveable.

So amid the ceaseless clamor, the Lord's Supper is Good News we can see and touch. It recalls God's great love and our high mission; it strengthens courage, passion, and resilience. Here, every time we gather, is opportunity to renew our covenant, to answer, once again, God's call to *be* Christ for our families and neighbors.

Compared to our *lives*, religious words don't count for much. Those we want to evangelize and those we want to keep in the fold look to *what we are like*. And that is just what this meal is about. ■

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## References

1. Revelation 14:12.
2. *Washington Post*, December 29, 1999, A12.
3. Recounted in Lee. C. Camp, *Mere Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 190, 191.
4. Matthew 26:26–28.
5. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.17.38.
6. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 660.
7. See, in Peter's Sermon at Pentecost, Acts 2:34.
8. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 25.