

Short Studies in
BIBLICAL THEOLOGY



THE LORD'S SUPPER

AS THE SIGN AND MEAL OF THE NEW COVENANT

GUY PRENTISS WATERS

“At the time of the Reformation, more ink was spilled on the doctrine and practice of the Lord’s Supper than on almost any other topic. Most of the debates have yet to be resolved, so what is a Christian to do to gain a better understanding of this sacrament? This concise book by Guy Waters is a helpful place to start. Waters places his discussion of the Supper squarely in the context of the Bible’s teaching about covenants, providing a particularly helpful introduction to the nature of covenant meals.”

Keith A. Mathison, Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformation Bible College; author, *From Age to Age*; *Given for You*; and *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*

“Many Christians suffer from a spiritual depth-perception problem or theological myopia when they come to the Lord’s Supper: all they see is bread and wine. Enter Guy Waters, expert spiritual ophthalmologist. In a single consultation he restores our depth perception and reduces our myopia. Perhaps to our surprise, he takes two-thirds of his time patiently guiding us through the pages of the Old Testament. Surely the Lord’s Supper is a *new* covenant ordinance! But Waters knows what he is doing. Prescribing biblically crafted lenses for us, he shows us the bread and wine again and asks, ‘Do you see more clearly now?’ Read these pages carefully and you will find yourself saying, ‘Yes, it’s so much clearer now. Thank you so much; it’s wonderful!’”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

“In a warm and readable style, Guy Waters blesses the church again. By first taking us on an engaging tour of the Bible’s covenants, he sets the table for his central concern—that in the communion meal the people of God ‘truly dine with our covenant Head,’ the Lord Jesus Christ. From beginning to end, the reader will find biblical texts surveyed persuasively, historic theological distinctions tackled thoughtfully, and practical concerns addressed winsomely. Before you next partake of the Lord’s Supper, consume this volume first.”

David B. Garner, Vice President for Advancement and Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary; author, *Sons in the Son* and *How Can I Know for Sure?*

“Don’t let this volume’s slim size trick you. In it Guy Waters dispenses a wealth of biblical reflection. Noting the Bible’s covenantal structure and paying attention to the entire biblical canon, he places the Supper of our Lord as the fulfillment of the pattern of God’s condescending to be present with his people and to give them signs of his presence. You may not agree with all of Waters’s conclusions. But everyone will benefit from his engagement with the biblical text and his pastoral reflections on the importance of the Supper for individual believers and the gathered church.”

Shawn D. Wright, Professor of Church History, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In this accessible, biblical-theological approach to the Lord’s Supper, Waters demonstrates the Supper’s integral place in redemptive history and its consequent importance for the life of the church, inasmuch as Christ offers himself as spiritual nourishment to be received through faith. This message needs to be heard and heeded. I hope this book has a wide readership.”

Robert Letham, Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Union School of Theology; author, *The Holy Trinity*; *Union with Christ*; and *The Work of Christ*

*The Lord's Supper as the Sign and
Meal of the New Covenant*

Short Studies in Biblical Theology

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The Lord's Supper as the Sign and Meal of the New Covenant

Guy Prentiss Waters

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*To my wife, Sarah,
fellow heir of the grace of life*

Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| Series Preface | 11 |
| Introduction | 13 |
| 1 Covenant Basics | 19 |
| 2 Covenant Signs | 43 |
| 3 Covenant Meals..... | 59 |
| 4 The Lord's Supper | 85 |
| 5 Conclusions for the Church..... | 109 |
| General Index..... | 119 |
| Scripture Index..... | 123 |

Series Preface

Most of us tend to approach the Bible early on in our Christian lives as a vast, cavernous, and largely impenetrable book. We read the text piecemeal, finding golden nuggets of inspiration here and there, but remain unable to plug any given text meaningfully into the overarching storyline. Yet one of the great advances in evangelical biblical scholarship over the past few generations has been the recovery of biblical theology—that is, a renewed appreciation for the Bible as a theologically unified, historically rooted, progressively unfolding, and ultimately Christ-centered narrative of God’s covenantal work in our world to redeem sinful humanity.

This renaissance of biblical theology is a blessing, yet little of it has been made available to the general Christian population. The purpose of *Short Studies in Biblical Theology* is to connect the resurgence of biblical theology at the academic level with everyday believers. Each volume is written by a capable scholar or churchman who is consciously writing in a way that requires no prerequisite theological training of the reader. Instead, any thoughtful Christian disciple can track with and benefit from these books.

Each volume in this series takes a whole-Bible theme and traces it through Scripture. In this way readers not only learn about a

given theme but also are given a model for how to read the Bible as a coherent whole.

We have launched this series because we love the Bible, we love the church, and we long for the renewal of biblical theology in the academy to enliven the hearts and minds of Christ's disciples all around the world. As editors, we have found few discoveries more thrilling in life than that of seeing the whole Bible as a unified story of God's gracious acts of redemption, and indeed of seeing the whole Bible as ultimately about Jesus, as he himself testified (Luke 24:27; John 5:39).

The ultimate goal of *Short Studies in Biblical Theology* is to magnify the Savior and to build up his church—magnifying the Savior through showing how the whole Bible points to him and his gracious rescue of helpless sinners; and building up the church by strengthening believers in their grasp of these life-giving truths.

Dane C. Ortlund and Miles V. Van Pelt

Introduction

It is fair to say that many believers think of the Lord's Supper as a matter of long-standing controversy in the Christian church. What exactly happens at the Lord's Supper? What is the relationship between the body and blood of Jesus Christ and the bread and wine? How often should we observe the Lord's Supper? May we observe the Supper outside of the local church? What qualifies a person to come to the Lord's Table?

These questions touch on differences that have emerged within the Christian church concerning the doctrine and practice of the Lord's Supper. They are legitimate questions in themselves. To mention them as I have is not to say that they have no biblical answers. They do have answers. It is, rather, to observe that such questions may well tempt believers to retreat from the Lord's Supper. Christians might conclude that the Supper is a complex matter best taken up by seasoned theologians, that it is a matter of doctrinal controversy but of little practical importance. For all intents and purposes, they could reason, the Lord's Supper is best left to others; it has no meaningful significance to the Christian life.

It would be sad were Christians to come to such a conclusion. That would upend the whole purpose of God in giving the Lord's Supper to his people. That purpose is to support and strengthen the

faith of believers. To deprive ourselves of the Supper is to deprive ourselves of the strength and assurance that God gives to our faith through it. One reason I have written this book is to help Christians recover the importance of the Lord's Supper in the Christian life through a renewed appreciation of the Supper as both a *sign* and the *meal* of the new covenant. Our aim is to see better how the Lord's Supper points to and confirms the blessings and benefits that God has poured out upon his people in Jesus Christ.

God's provision of the Supper is part of a long-standing pattern of his gracious dealings with his people throughout history. Just as God has always made covenants with his people, so also God has always given covenant *signs* and covenant *meals* to his people. In all of God's covenants, he has given his people tangible signs or tokens tied to the promises that he has made with them. God has also appointed meals for his covenant people to help them appreciate his goodness and abundance in the gospel. God appeals to us through our five senses—sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell—to encourage us to believe the good news that he offers us in the promises of the gospel.

God has never chosen at random the physical elements that have made up the signs he appointed for his covenants, and it is no accident that he has appointed meals throughout redemptive history for his people. These signs and meals always have had some meaningful connection to the promises to which they correspond. There is a reason that in the Lord's Supper we partake of *bread* and *wine* at a *Table* that Christ has spread for us and to which he invites us.

If there is meaning and purpose to the signs and meals that God has appointed within his covenants, there is equally meaning and purpose to the covenants themselves. In other words, the covenants that God made with his people were not sporadic or disassociated events in the history of God's dealings with humanity. On the contrary, there is a glorious unity to the covenants of the Bible. When we

grasp that unity, we will better appreciate the meaning of the signs and meals that God has given, along with the covenants he has made with his people. A full appreciation of the importance of the Lord's Supper in the Christian life requires us to look first to the progression of God's covenants in human history and then to the signs and meals that God appoints within those covenants.

The project we are undertaking goes by the name *biblical theology*. What is biblical theology? It is not simply theology that is true to the Bible. Biblical theology *is* that, but that definition covers many other things as well. A clear understanding of biblical theology will guide our reflections on the Lord's Supper.

Biblical theology must begin, as does any legitimate approach to the Bible, with the conviction that the Bible is the Word of God. The Bible is, in other words, the verbal revelation of God to humanity. For all the diversity represented in the Bible—different types of literature, different human authors, different primary audiences—the Bible has a single, divine author. That author has spoken, and his speech is the words and propositions that make up the books of the Old and New Testaments.

The chief concern of the Bible and, therefore, of the Bible's divine author, is salvation. The Bible assumes that all human beings (except one man, Jesus Christ) are sinners in need of salvation. God created man upright, but we, in Adam and by reason of our own sins, have gone astray. The Bible tells us what God has done so that sinners may be saved.

God's saving words and deeds did not transpire all at once. God gradually and progressively revealed his purpose to save human beings in and by his Son. This saving revelation began soon after the fall, in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:15), and this saving revelation came to its culmination and climax in the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1–4), who is the incarnate Word of God (John 1:1), and in whom all God's

promises find their yes and amen (2 Cor. 1:20). Christ, by his death and resurrection, has saved a multitude from among every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. Jesus has not only saved people who lived after his death and resurrection. He has also saved people who lived prior to his death and resurrection. For the most part, those who were saved prior to the life and ministry of Christ were among the old covenant people of God, Israel. Even then, Israelites were saved in the same way that people today are saved—through faith in Christ. This is how Abraham (Romans 4; Galatians 3), Moses (Heb. 11:26), David (Romans 4), and Isaiah (John 12), to name just a few, were saved.

What, then, is biblical theology? Biblical theology explores the unfolding of God's self-revelation in the Bible. Biblical theology gives due weight to the central concern of biblical revelation—the glory of God in saving sinners through the work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It notes both the progressive and organic character of biblical revelation. Biblical revelation is *progressive* in that it moves toward a divinely predetermined goal, namely, the person and work of Jesus Christ. Biblical revelation is *organic* in that this movement resembles the growth of an organism. As a tree grows from a seed to a sapling to a mature plant, or a human being grows from a fetus to a toddler to a mature person, so also biblical revelation witnesses the maturation of God's saving promises from their shadowy beginnings to their mature completion in the Lord Jesus Christ (see Col. 2:16–17).

One of the most important ways in which God revealed his plan to redeem sinners through Christ was in making covenants with human beings. Through these covenants, God gradually revealed more and more of his one purpose and plan to save sinners in every age through Jesus Christ. In so revealing Christ to his people, God was summoning them to trust in his Son for their salvation. Covenants (and, we will see, their signs and meals) find their meaning and integration in the person and work of Christ.

Chapter 1 will offer a brief definition of *covenant*. We will then reflect on the major covenants of the Bible. Which are they? What is their relationship with each other? How does each point to the saving work of Jesus Christ?

In chapter 2, we will look at covenant signs. We will see that such signs are a staple of God's covenants with human beings. They are an important way that God condescends to us in order to reinforce his covenant promises to us. Covenant signs reach out to senses beyond the ear. We see them, feel them, smell them, and taste them. These signs help us to see how committed God is to our growth in faith.

Chapter 3 will look at covenant meals. Throughout history, God has appointed special meals for his people to enjoy. Like signs, these meals are designed to point beyond themselves. They point to the rich and abundant spiritual provision that God has stored up for us in Christ.

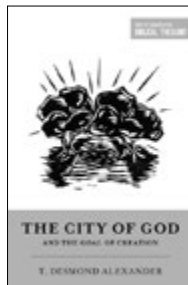
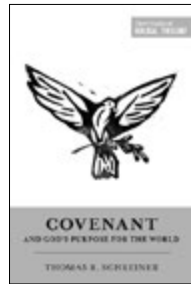
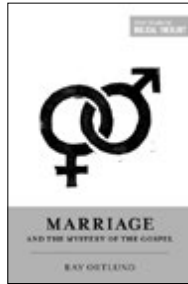
Chapter 4 will focus on the Lord's Supper. We will look at what the New Testament tells us about the Supper, from Jesus's institution of this meal, to the early church's faithful observance of it, to a young church's confusion and misuse of it. We will see how the apostle Paul sternly but patiently addressed the church's misapprehensions by setting the church on a sound doctrinal and practical foundation. In the Lord's Supper, we commune with the Lord Jesus Christ. Even so, Paul insists, the Supper is not a private experience. It is a family meal. We must not come to this meal and be indifferent toward our brothers and sisters in Christ. Neither is the Supper a mechanical experience. We have work to do in order to get out of that meal what Christ would have us to receive.

Chapter 5 will summarize our findings and then give some attention to some of the practical questions that have arisen around the Supper in the history and life of the church. While these questions will not set the agenda of our biblical-theological study of the Lord's

Supper, they are important nonetheless. A careful biblical-theological survey of the Supper goes a long way toward providing sound, practical answers to the very questions we bring to the Supper.

I have many goals in this little work. I hope that you will better understand the place and importance of covenant signs and covenant meals in the Bible. I hope that the Lord's Supper will take on renewed importance in your own Christian life. I hope that you will come to appreciate the way in which this and other covenant signs and covenant meals are related to the covenants God has made with his people. I hope that you will appreciate the grand unity and cohesiveness of biblical revelation, and the centrality of covenants to that unity and cohesiveness. But above all, I hope that you will trust, love, and hope in the covenant-making, covenant-keeping God who has saved sinners in Jesus Christ, and has taken them to be a people for his own possession. May your studies in the Scripture draw you closer to the God who has come near to human beings in Christ and has, in the Son of God, given undeserving sinners nothing less than himself.

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*"When he had given thanks, he broke it, and said,
'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'"*

1 CORINTHIANS 11:24

The Lord's Supper is more than a church tradition or a complex doctrinal controversy—it has practical importance to our daily lives. When Jesus instituted the Supper, it was meant to strengthen the faith of his followers by reminding them of his promises. God has always made promises to his people through covenants, and along with them given signs and meals to point to and confirm his blessings. Looking at the unity of the covenants throughout the Bible, this book will help Christians recover the practical importance of the Lord's Supper as both a sign and a meal of the new covenant blessings God has bestowed on believers in Christ.

"Many Christians suffer from a spiritual depth-perception problem or theological myopia when they come to the Lord's Supper: all they see is bread and wine. Enter Guy Waters, expert spiritual ophthalmologist. In a single consultation he restores our depth perception and reduces our myopia."

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON, Chancellor's Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary

"From beginning to end, you will find biblical texts surveyed persuasively, historic theological distinctions tackled thoughtfully, and practical concerns addressed winsomely. Before you next partake of the Lord's Supper, consume this volume first."

DAVID B. GARNER, Vice President for Advancement and Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary

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The Short Studies in Biblical Theology series is designed to help readers see the whole Bible as a unified story culminating in Jesus Christ. Written by trusted scholars, each volume traces an important topic through God's Word and explores its significance for the Christian life.

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