Theological Method on the Bible Among Churches of Christ: 
A Proposal

The Interpretation of Scripture in Churches of Christ: 
The Present State of the Problem

In his recent study, *Bringing the Word to Life: An Assessment of the Hermeneutical Impasse in Churches of Christ*, Gary Collier paints a bleak picture of the current state of affairs in biblical interpretation in churches of Christ.¹ By way of assessment of the current state of biblical interpretation in the brotherhood an overview of Collier’s argument seems in order.

Commencing with the Campbells, but especially throughout the era of strict Rationalism (circa 1850-1960), the conservative heirs of the Campbell-Stone movement carefully refined a form of biblical interpretation based on the grammatico-historical method. This method placed great emphasis on viewing the Bible as a set of facts that authorized all aspects of the Christian life either by direct command, example, or necessary inference.² Collier calls this the Rationalist/Inductive School. It was clearly incarnated in the old Gospel Advocate Commentaries and the bulk of the exegesis done in the various highly influential Christian college lectureship volumes during this era. Collier indicates that, as a historical fact, this approach is in serious decline among the churches of Christ today. He excoriates this hermeneutical method. It is badly flawed as to its philosophical presuppositions, its inconsistency of application, and above all, its inability to be able to nourish consistent strong spiritual growth in the life of the church.³

Since about 1960 a new mode of biblical interpretation has found favor in influential circles within churches of Christ. Collier calls this the Historical/Contextual School. Essentially, the practitioners of this way of studying the Bible interact freely with the higher-critical approaches that are dominant in the wider ecumenical community and the Academy. The fruits of this work within the brotherhood can be seen primarily in the Living Word Commentaries.
and various articles in Restoration Quarterly. The latter journal was founded in 1957.

Interestingly enough, this new approach also is scored by Collier. Essentially its practitioners are perceived in their scholarly works to be out of touch with their theological tradition and vague about their hermeneutical presuppositions and methodologies. Collier regards even the Living Word Commentaries (an example of popularized scholarship) as being only marginally useful for the average bible-school teacher. He appeals to scholars in the brotherhood to evaluate their work in the light of their confessional heritage. Does their commitment and theological outlook provide a framework for the kind of scholarly work which they do? Often, it does not!

Except for a common respect for the text it is hard to see very much continuity between these two hermeneutical approaches. We are at an impasse. The impact of the Rationalist/Inductive School, still strong in some quarters, is in terminal decline. The Historical/Contextual School shows great reluctance to engage and enter into contemporary issues of biblical interpretation in the life of the church. It is a time of uncertainty for the brotherhood in this crucial area. It is not surprising that in this atmosphere certain "faddish" and "off-the-wall" theological ideas such as, "we need to share how we feel about the text," get an easy hearing. Because of this situation our theological identity is at stake.

Collier's paper represents a major milestone. It is part of a welcome assessment currently going on with respect to the history of biblical interpretation in the churches of Christ. The paper is thorough and well-documented. It gives a very adequate overview of our hermeneutical pilgrimage in the last two centuries. I find myself in broad agreement with it. As such it can serve as an excellent starting point for discussion about the course ahead.
A Model of Scripture regularly assumed in Churches of Christ has some major Flaws: It places too much weight on Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics

In the final pages of his paper Collier, in effect, challenges Restoration theologians to come up with some constructive proposals to lead us out of our current difficulties. Before we turn to make a tentative response to this challenge it is necessary to discuss some methodological questions that surface in Collier's analysis.

If there were a point where I would have some difficulty with Collier it would be in the impression which he leaves that it is the failure to have an adequate hermeneutical method for interpreting Scripture that has led to our current theological malaise. In my view, it is not hermeneutics, but theological method that stands at the root of our problems. No hermeneutical model or method, in and of itself, especially in this age of cultural pluralism, is capable of leading us out of our current theological difficulties. Hermeneutical proposals, in and of themselves, only have validity with respect to their ability to function coherently within a system of thought. In my judgment one can easily overdo the criticism of the hermeneutics of the nineteenth-century Restorationists. When it is all said and done it is highly unlikely that their method of interpretation of the Scripture was as obscurantist as is sometimes supposed. It differed little from much of the common type of exegesis that had been going on in the Reformed tradition for the previous two centuries. During this era this hermeneutical procedure was popular among Baptists and other groups who formed the evangelical consensus that dominated late nineteenth-century America. It worked. Perhaps we in churches of Christ, with our great love for things that are ancient, have stubbornly held on to these hermeneutical methods for too long. But that is our fault for failing to keep up with new developments and implementing them.

Rather, speaking as one whom Collier would call a practitioner of the Historical/Contextual School, I would say that this new hermeneutical methodology has as
many theological problems as those operative in the nineteenth century. Whether it is our old or new hermeneutical models, at the heart of our problem, it is a fundamental mistake we have made over justification for our theological proposals. Many (both under the old and new models) have bought into a view of Scripture as the seamless depository of Revelation which functions as the basic blueprint for the entire Christian enterprise. To change the metaphor, Scripture is viewed as a kind of quarry out of which is mined facts, inerrant propositions, or sacred history (take your choice), which are supposed to provide a body of coherent doctrines that, in turn, furnish authoritative answers to our theological quests. If we have a theological issue (the nature of the life hereafter; the office of the ministry) we assume that to find the answer we need to have a serious Bible study. That will surely solve the problem because the answer has to be encoded somewhere in the Scriptures; and if the answer does not come our procedure is to study it again — perhaps with a new hermeneutical technique. The truth is that biblical theology cannot distill from the current texts of the Bible a seamless body of doctrine; and no hermeneutical model can find consistent and widespread approval among us for something that is not "in the text."⁹

Thus we argue that our view of Scripture has placed far too much weight on both biblical theology and hermeneutical techniques to find the answers to our theological problems. As a product of the Reformation of Western Christendom we are too far into sola scriptura ever to question that our theological proposals must be warranted by Scripture. But this does not mean that we should accept a model of Scripture as a fundamental blueprint that furnishes all answers to our theological questions. Or, to say it another way, we need some clarification about how we justify our theological proposals.
An Alternative Model for Construing the Authority of Scripture

At the heart of the witness of churches of Christ is a concern to be obedient to the gospel, to preach it, and maintain its authority in the life of the church. Linked with this concern is the presupposition that the gospel may be maintained in purity if we follow the precepts and precedents of the early apostolic church which is described authoritatively in the New Testament. It has been our constant belief that when we do this we can as "the church restored" legitimately be perceived as a truly Christian fellowship.

In an earlier article, I have argued that this theological raison d'être is a version of the concept of the four marks of the church, which from the earliest centuries, Christians have used as a basic criterion to describe an authentic Christian Fellowship. Out of the world of the ancient people of God, reconstituted by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the grace of God was shown to humankind in a paradigmatic way. At the heart of our position is the claim that this same grace of God is available to us today when we proclaim the one gospel and obey its ordinances. Gospel and ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper) are ineluctably linked because they are centered in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. The heart and soul of our faith rests in this center. It constitutes the basic warrant and the discernment for making theological judgments.

Scripture is important because it "marks off" and "makes available" to the community the narrative story of the people of God which culminated in the coming of the gospel. But our basic authority is in the truth of the gospel. It is not in some scheme or metaphysical arrangement in Scripture as both the Rationalist/Inductive and the Historical/Contextual hermeneutical methodologies appear to presuppose. We must shift our view of the nature of the hermeneutical task for the church. It is not to find the authoritative facts or doctrines in Scripture; or even to find the original meaning of texts. Rather, acting on the basis of our
theological center in the gospel/ordinances,\(^{12}\) which God has provided as channels of grace for the spiritual growth of the community, we should be concerned to see that our theology and communal life conforms to that norm.

A Proposal

Since the proof of the pudding is in the eating it may be helpful to take a look at how this suggestion for changing our hermeneutical focus works out in practice. As a case example we will deal with the hermeneutics of one of the ordinances themselves: the Lord's Supper. This brings us to make an observation and a proposal.

Our observation has its genesis in the life of the church today. With respect to the function of the ordinances there appears to be a strange kind of schizophrenia among us. With regard to baptism there is widespread unanimity and agreement about belief and practice. Baptism is the \textit{rite de passage} demanded of believers which effects entrance into Christ for the remission of sins. Through the action of the rite itself the believer, in close identification with the power and grace coming from the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, passes from death to life. There is widespread anecdotal evidence to indicate we believe that for baptism to be perceived as valid it must be an action that precisely imitates as closely as possible the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Correct action and grace are linked together.

But with reference to the Lord's Supper, the situation among us is almost the total opposite. Most of the words spoken at its observance speak of it as a memorial. But, beyond that, there is widespread divergence as to its meaning; especially as to whether it ought to be considered as a channel of grace to believers. And there is considerable unconcern as to its manner of observance in congregational life. Especially, there is little attempt to highlight the symbolism of the one loaf and cup. The practice of breaking the loaf in connection with the prayer of thanks at
the table, an important liturgical act for the early Restorationists,\(^{13}\) has been abandoned in many churches. The cup is no longer poured out by the one presiding at the table. Instead, ushers rush to distribute trays containing multiple containers of a non-alcoholic grape juice. In other words, just about anything goes.\(^ {14}\)

What is going on here? Why are we so concerned to be meticulous in our practice of baptism in keeping with biblical precedents and we are so unconcerned about the observance of the Lord's Supper?

Thus we come to introduce our proposal. Since obedient observance of the ordinances (baptism and the Lord's Supper) stands at the center of our identity as a people, I suggest that we should have a clear and consistent view of what these ordinances denote. We have already noted that the liturgical action in baptism is viewed among us as being the vehicle of the Spirit to bring the believer both into conscious identification with Jesus' commitment in his death and to convey to him or her the benefits attained as a result of his perfect sacrifice. Consistent with this understanding of liturgical action, in this paper, I would contend that in the Lord's Supper the death of Jesus is re-presented and the believer both in response to and on the basis of the perfect once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus, pledges his or her life as a sacrifice to God. Thus, baptism and the Lord's Supper are at the center of all true worship — the giving back to God of that which came from him and is rightfully his.\(^ {15}\) Both ordinances are worship par excellence because they constitute the core of our response to God.

As any other theological proposals, this proposal must be warranted. I suggest that it be warranted on three grounds:\(^ {16}\) (1) Scripture (the idea is clearly apostolic); (2) Tradition (i.e. it is the considered values of key and significant figures in the Restoration Movement); (3) The wider Ecumenical Community (this view has broad acceptance in historic Christianity!).
Historically, within the history of Christianity, debates about the meaning of the Lord's Supper have often proven intractable and very difficult. Our view is, that as an exercise in hermeneutics, if this project is successful, the methodology may be used on other theological issues.

Procedurally, the rest of this essay will be concerned with working out the proposal. Thus we assert that Scripture, the (Restoration) Tradition, and major segments of historical Christianity have understood the Lord's Supper to be a concrete re-presentation of the death of Jesus where, by God's grace, the believer nourished by the offering of this perfect service responds in sacrificial service to him.

The Hermeneutics of the Accounts of
The Lord's Supper in Scripture

In this unit of the paper we will focus upon how the Scripture warrants the view that the Lord's Supper is ineluctably connected with the death of Jesus and how this connection is exploited hermeneutically by Paul.

We know from Acts 2:42 and 20:7-11 that there existed at certain meals among the earliest Christians a rite that contributed in a special way to the unique identity of these believers. The precise origin and form of this rite is shrouded in mystery and, in this century, remains the subject of fierce debate among the scholars. There is no question, however, that by the time the New Testament books were written, the rite was closely tied to the death of Jesus. The gospels indicate that on the same day (following Hebrew time) that Jesus was crucified, he began by eating a meal with his disciples where bread was broken and wine was poured. This connection between the action at the last meal and Jesus' death has provided the key for interpreting the Lord's Supper from the first century until this day.
All three major source accounts in the New Testament (Matthew/Mark; Luke, Paul) testify to this connection.

In Matt 26:26-29/Mk 14:22-25, while Jesus and his disciples were eating a meal, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and distributed it to his disciples with the injunction, "Take, eat, this is my body!" On the same day that Jesus intentionally broke bread and referred to it as his body -- his body was nailed to the cross; thus the connection between his action at the meal and his death is unmistakable. Likewise, with reference to the cup. In Matthew the cup is taken, and after thanks, the disciples are invited to share it with the words, "You all drink from it." Furthermore, this is accompanied with the additional word that this is blood of the (new) covenant (Jeremiah 31:34) which, in turn, was reminiscent of the covenant sealed with blood by Moses (Ex 24:6-8) and which was to be a pouring out for the many (Is 53:7-12) for the forgiveness of sins. Mark has essentially the same account without the reference to the forgiveness of sins. The strong connections between these words and the death of Jesus is self-evident.

The account in Luke, as is well known, has its own peculiar difficulties because it is replete with textual and compositional problems. Even if we take the account of the Western text (22:15-19a), as a basis for analysis, the theme of suffering is present (22:15). This is driven home in the sayings in 22:19b-20 which appear to be a conflation between Matthew and Paul emphasizing, in the words of institution, a close connection with the death of Jesus.

When we come to Paul (1 Cor 11:23-24) we have what is probably, in point of time, the earliest tradition on the early observance of the rite. Bracketing the issue of the authenticity of Lk 22:19b-20, there is stated the command to observe "in order to make remembrance of me." The statement over the broken bread is that it is the body of Christ (broken = some manuscripts) for you. Again Is 53:11-12 appears to be in the background. Thus, the bread saying is specifically remembered as being connected with Jesus' death.
Similarly, the saying that the cup is the new covenant in my blood is an absolutely unequivocal statement that the death of Jesus will be the vehicle inaugurating a new agreement between God and his people. From the time of the earliest accounts, the observance of the Lord's Supper has been tied closely to the events and significance of the passion of Jesus. This must be the foundation upon which any interpretation of the Lord's Supper itself is based; but the connection between the Supper and the death may be used also as a hermeneutical device or discrimin to solve theological problems in the church!

There are two passages in Paul wherein is highlighted the earliest direct commentary on the meaning of the Supper (1 Cor 10:16-17; 11:26-32). We will now examine both of these passages briefly as examples of how the tradition about the death of Jesus, incorporated into the liturgical accounts of the Supper, is used by Paul as a hermeneutical device to solve theological problems that arose in the Corinthian church.

In 1 Cor 10:16-22 the issue under discussion is the incompatibility between Christian participation in the Lord's Supper and in pagan idol feasts. Paul did not believe that the gods re-presented by the idols had any real existence; but behind the nothingness of the idols stood the demons. They had real powers. A Christian who participated in the cultic feast at Corinth was, in fact, in danger of being in communication with a pagan altar. This action was mutually incompatible with the Lordship of Christ (1 Cor 14:21).

In order to address this situation the Corinthians received a lesson on the meaning of the liturgical action of the Lord's Supper. In 1 Cor 10:16 a tradition about the cup and the bread (the order reversed for a theological point on the bread to be made in v.17) is rehearsed. Paul presumes that the Corinthians are familiar with it and they have a common understanding about it. As such, it is similar to 1 Cor 15:3-5 where in a venerable tradition the Corinthians are
reminded that Christ died for our sins (cf. Matt 26:28). Thus in one tradition, it is remembered that Christ's death is for our sins, and in the other (1 Cor 10:16), through the liturgical action of the Supper, there is a concern to remember that the benefits of the death of Christ are appropriated. For Paul, this had important practical theological implications for the church.

When the Corinthians came together at the Supper (just as at the eve of the crucifixion) Christ's death was vividly re-presented before them in rite—and the believers entered into a common participation (koinōnia) with his activity. The common participation was supposed to be fellowship of sufferings (Rom 8:17). To have communion with Christ was to pledge allegiance to accomplishing his way in the world and to continue to bring in the redemption of the world definitively inaugurated with his death.

But, in 1 Cor 10:17, Paul needed to make the practical interpretation of this truth for his concrete situation. As the community of the faithful (one body) though diverse, they had a unity because of their participation in the one (broken) loaf. With this common solidarity and dependence upon Jesus the believers at Corinth were to owe exclusive allegiance to their Lord. Therefore they were to have nothing to do with the pagan cultic feasts. Here the hermeneutics of the Lord's Supper has important ramifications for the ethical life.

It should be observed that there is nothing said here about any real presence of Christ in the elements. In the liturgical action the death of Jesus is vividly re-presented and it is here that the believer recommits to participation in his cause. The table is the place where the Lord's sacrifice is vividly re-presented and we offer on its merits our paltry lives as a sacrifice to God.23

In 1 Cor 11:26-32 we have a second interpretation set forth by Paul when the tradition about the Lord's Supper becomes the hermeneutical tool that is used to solve a practical problem in the church at Corinth; namely, that of divisions
between believers. In a curious way the issue of allegiances and solidarity present in 1 Corinthians 10 resurfaces -- albeit in a quite different way. At the assembly in the atria of the members' homes there appeared to be a strong spirit of singularity and lack of concern for other believers during the traditional meal or "love feast." Apparently it was felt that oneness was something to be shown among the believers only in the participation of the Lord's Supper after the regular meal. Paul was concerned that the dis-unity at the traditional meal threatened the unity and solidarity that was typified by the Supper. The assembly at Corinth appeared to be a concrete example of an inner contradiction. The Supper presumed theological unity; the social situation at the "love feast" testified to practical disunity.

Paul responds by again rehearsing the tradition about the Supper (1 Cor 11:23-25). Then, in 1 Cor 11:26, he enters directly into hermeneutical commentary upon the relevance of their shared understanding of the Lord's Supper for the concrete situation. The re-presentation of the death of Christ in the liturgical action of the supper is a concrete proclamation of the death of the Lord. For Paul, the death of Jesus was the culmination of a life of commitment, not to his own concerns, but the concerns of others. The implicit point is that if the liturgical action testified to the obedience of our crucified Lord, in order for the Supper to be celebrated genuinely, the same commitment should be manifest among the Corinthians when they broke the loaf and drank the cup -- and this should show itself in concern for the others. Theology and ethics are one at the table.

Thus, in 1 Cor 11:27-32, Paul assessed the Corinthians on the basis of this criterion. To eat the Supper without showing care for the brother is an inappropriate "interpretation" of the tradition (1 Cor 11:27). They ought to be sure that they draw the right connections between Jesus' death and their lifestyle before they eat the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:27-28).
The phrase "not discerning the body," (11:29) has produced considerable comment recently.24 The argument is that the body refers to the church. Paul is understood to demand that the major focus of attention be on the care and edification of the brethren rather than on the sacrificed life of Christ. I stand by my earlier assertion that because of the reference in 11:27 to body (as Jesus re-presented in his death at the table) this use must govern the interpretation of 11:29.25 To be sure, however, it is Paul's point that when Christ is perceived correctly in his death, it necessarily follows that there is a demand to show care for others. Thus, derivatively, there may be a communal under-tone to the text.

This failure to interpret the Supper correctly has even resulted in sickness and moral failure in the life of the congregation (1 Cor 11:30f.). Practically speaking, in order to overcome their divisions, the Corinthians are urged to satisfy their hunger pains at home (1 Cor 11:34). Above all, they are to see that what takes place at the Lord's Supper is closely connected with a self-consistent conduct at the Love Feasts. Here the Lord's Supper functions as a criterion for a genuinely Christian hermeneutic on ethical living.

Summary

Our discussion of the Scripture must now be brought to a close. Our analysis has attempted to set forth the proposal that the observance of the Lord's Supper was central to the life of the early church. At the Lord's Table the death of Jesus was concretely re-presented in liturgical action and believers through their participation shared in this grace. As such, the observance of the Supper was the most regular concrete way in which the gospel was set forth to the believing community (1 Cor 11:26). Paul could refer to it as a basis for dealing with practical problems in the churches. We should do likewise today.
But this appeal can only be credible when the liturgical action of the Supper (just as in baptism) is carried out in a consistent way. The death of Jesus must be vividly re-presented each time we are at the table and the action verbally interpreted so that we may perceive that the total life of the community is nourished from this living center.

Unfortunately today, in many churches of Christ, in my judgment, we are close to a situation described in I Cor 11:29. We do not discern the body when the words and actions at the table bear only faint resemblance to the ancient rite. The need to distribute the crackers and Welch's grape juice at rapid speed often becomes the major factor in observance of the Supper. In some quarters our observance of the Supper approaches a travesty. We need to foster a healthy respect for the apostolic tradition about the Supper, and in light of Scripture be prepared to correct our practices.26

Restoration Views of the Lord's Supper

So far in this paper we have taken the position that Scripture warrants the view that in the liturgical action of the Lord's Supper Christ is visibly represented as the crucified one; and in the course of our participation we sacrifice ourselves to God on the basis of his service and by grace receive the benefits of this once-and-for-all offering.

This is a fundamental theological claim; and we have argued that this sacramental understanding of the Supper was used by Paul as a criterion to solve practical problems in the life of the churches. It is our argument that a similar view of the foundational connections between the proclamation of the gospel and observance of the ordinances could well be of assistance in contemporary discussions about authority and the hermeneutical task among the churches of Christ today.
This strong connection between gospel and ordinances is not only a central feature of the biblical witness but also has functioned as a central point of emphasis in the Campbell-Stone movement. Unlike the Lutherans, Anglicans, or Presbyterians, churches of Christ do not appeal to certain historical confessions to warrant their theological practices. Partly this is because of the dominant emphasis on the norm of the primitive church among us; also involved is the early Restorationist reaction to the evils of rank denominationalism which bore fruit in the slogan, "No creed but the Christ." Nevertheless, from the outset, members of the Campbell-Stone movement have published a large body of literature on our faith and practice. Emerging out of this corpus are important statements that can be reasonably said to represent the views of a considerable segment of the movement. We will now examine several statements on the Lord's Supper set forth by three of the most prominent theologians of the Restoration Movement.

Campbell and the Christian System

The Christian System represents the systematic views of the early Alexander Campbell and is a classic of Restoration history.²⁷ In it he has a major statement on the Lord's Supper.²⁸ Interestingly enough, Campbell introduces his discussion on the Supper with the heading, "Breaking the Loaf." He claims that through the various dispensations of the people of God the table of the Lord has been important and remains so in the Christian era.²⁹ Then he gets to the heart of the matter. It is a point of great importance to recognize that on the table there is one loaf. And then he notes Paul's view that "because there is one loaf we must consider the whole congregation as one body."³⁰ He argues that what Paul was doing was reasoning from what is more plain to what is less plain. There was no dispute that there was one loaf on the table. Therefore there should be no dispute about the oneness of the body.³¹ Campbell goes on to reinforce the notion
that all of this theologizing of Paul is based on an appreciation for the liturgical action of the Supper. He argues strongly that the liturgical action of breaking the loaf by the one presiding at the table must be carried out in such a way that the believing community can appropriately remember that it is at the table the Lord's death is re-presented. This point is driven home with a pithy comment:

Upon the loaf and upon the cup of the Lord in letters which speak not to the eye but to the heart of every disciple is inscribed "When this you see remember me." ...The loaf is thus constituted a representation of his body -- first whole, then wounded for our sins. The cup is thus instituted a representation of his blood -- once his life, but now poured out to cleanse us from our sins. In receiving it the disciple says, "Lord, I believe it..." Each disciple in handing the symbols to his fellow disciples says in effect, "You my brother, once an alien are now a citizen of heaven... Mutually embraced in the everlasting arms I embrace you in mine; thy sorrows shall be my sorrows and thy joys my joys."32

This must be recognized for what it is: a classic statement of Restoration eucharistic doctrine. Of course it is heavily dependent upon Campbell's philosophical-theological notion of the ordinances being the divinely ordained means whereby one enters into the new state of salvation. But what is of special interest is that the ordinances are valid only if we follow closely the liturgical action set forth in the Scriptures. When this is done Christ is truly represented and his benefits are appropriately made available for the life of the community.

It is easy to see that there is here set forth a basic view of the ordinances that served as a badge of identity for the early Restoration churches. Campbell himself was prepared to utilize the importance of the Supper as a theological criterion for argumentation on the practical issues of the time of its observance.33 His theological descendants would be wise to also think deeply about its hermeneutical significance for the life of the church.
William Robinson: A Twentieth Century British View

The name of William Robinson is not well known among American churches of Christ. However, as a member of the Associated Churches of Christ in Great Britain, he wrote authoritatively on issues about the ordinances. As one who did not live on the American frontier Robinson is significant because, as a lone voice, he continued to theologize within the context of the Campbell-Stone movement in healthy dialogue with the theology of the wider ecumenical community of Europe.

Almost fifty years ago his article on Sacramental Theory revivified some of the key Campbellian ideas on the importance of the Lord's Supper. In this article Robinson stressed that Christianity, having begun as a way of worship and life guided by trust in Jesus, was based on certain redemptive acts which occurred in history. Records of these are found in the Gospels or in summary form in such passages as 1 Cor 15:3-5. It is the role of liturgical rites to represent and mediate those acts to the believing community. Indeed, Robinson claims, it is the function of liturgical action in the worship service to represent the whole life of Christ before worshippers in act after successive act.

Crucial is the role of baptism and the Supper. The action and performance of the rite of baptism makes effective the power of Christ's death, burial and resurrection for the believer. It is not mere recollection of a past event but co-experience with this sacred action here and now. To tamper with either its action or symbolism is to place in danger the power of the baptism to witness to the Christian gospel.

Likewise, with the Lord's Supper, in the liturgical action of the Supper, Christ is visibly depicted as crucified. Only through appropriate observance
of this ritual does the royal priesthood offer its true sacrifice; for in so doing we offer ourselves back to God not on a basis of our determination or preference but through our great High Priest who is represented before us. 39

Again, to tamper with the liturgical action is to render highly problematic the key connection between sacred acts and redemptive appropriation.

This article is a classic statement of Restorationist thinking about the ordinances. It stresses the irresistible connection between gospel and ordinances.

Everett Ferguson: A Twentieth Century American View

In several of his published works Everett Ferguson has emphasized the great importance of the Lord's Supper for the church. 40 He has argued that central to the Supper are the themes of thanksgiving, memorial action, fellowship, and eschatological hope. 41

Ferguson stresses the importance of the action of thanksgiving at early Christian celebrations of the Supper. Analagous to the prayer of thanks at meals -- celebrated from time immemorial among the people of God -- the expression of thanksgiving and praise to God for his bountiful gifts, says Ferguson, was a central activity at the table. 42 What is unique about this celebration is the applied use of the familiar gestures done at each meal to the loaf and the cup. The prayers of thanksgiving for the bread and the cup attest to our special sense of thanksgiving for the salvific acts of Christ. 43 Thus, for Ferguson, the symbolic presence of the cup and the loaf and the prayers at the table are very important for the life of the church.

Ferguson is somewhat more equivocal than Campbell and Robinson in reference to the importance of the liturgical action in re-presenting the death of Christ at the table. He affirms the usual scholarly view that anamnesis is not mere anniversary or emblem; but a re-enactment which causes remembrance of a
past event. He likens the action of Jesus at the Last Supper to a prophetic sign-act.

Since the symbol partakes of the reality being enacted, when we repeat the action of Jesus, we bring the benefits of his death once more into our lives. We participate in his sacrifice (1 Cor 10:16).

Here Ferguson clearly echoes the view that the ordinances are a means whereby we participate in the benefits of the death and resurrection of Christ. However, there is no reference to the importance of the symbolism and liturgical action of the one loaf broken and cup poured at the table. As with the work of Campbell and Robinson, the published work we have noted from Ferguson is by no means a total systematic statement. However, it is interesting to note that the lack of emphasis on the importance of liturgical action at the Supper is consistent with current practices in churches of Christ.

Summary

An early Restoration leader once made this statement about the ordinances.

What, then, are baptism and the Lord's Supper? I answer that they are the crucifixion, or death, burial and resurrection of Christ repeating themselves in the life and profession of the disciples, and proclaiming to the ages that he, that was to come, is come. In participating in these ordinances, the disciples on their part declare that through faith in his name they are before all men dead and buried to sin, and alive unto righteousness.

We have argued that this theological view is warranted by the Scriptures. It has also been central to the theology of the Restoration Movement.

The Witness of the Wider Ecumenical Community

We have noted that a third basis for warranting a theological proposal is to determine whether the proposal has had credible acceptance elsewhere in the history of Christianity. Is our proposal idiosyncratic? Or has a version of
it already been preceived to have legitimacy in other segments of historic Christendom?

The true value of this warrant is primarily a negative one. There are important views on the ordinances in major segments of Christendom that are not warranted by the Scripture and are definitely not congruent with Restoration Theology. Nevertheless, if we were to set before the religious world a view of the ordinances that never had currency in historic Christendom, I for one, would be nervous. Restorationists consistently have argued that the theological positions which they hold are foundational for the unity of all believers. This means that they should have widespread acceptance as to their plausibility.

As James Duke intimates, it is not late-breaking news to assert that the Campbell-Stone movement has very close theological ties with the Reformed Tradition, one of the most significant segments of post-reformation Christianity in the West. In this connection, the real historical issue we may have to face on the Lord's Supper is whether we should decide in favor of Zwingli or Calvin.

The debate between the followers of Zwingli and Calvin turned on the issue as to whether God's spiritual offer of salvation could be experienced through the means of a sense-based act. The basic Reformed position held that the invisible grace of God as Word, Jesus Christ, comes to the faithful believer in the Supper and conveys the benefits of salvation. Zwingli did not necessarily agree. He argued that the Holy Spirit needs no material vehicle. If grace were usually conveyed through the ordinances the clergy, who controlled the ordinances, would control salvation. The Lord's Supper should be observed as a devotional act of thanksgiving for the benefits of the gospel already received, not as an offer of salvation from Christ.

To be sure, there are elements in the Zwinglian emphasis that make their way into the regular religious life of churches of Christ; our stress on the
Lord's Supper as memorial is a case in point. But our earlier analysis has shown that we fall very heavily in the camp of Calvin as to the true meaning of the Supper. Certainly this was the position of Campbell and his significant heirs. As Ferguson has noted, when we are at the table "we bring the benefits of his death once more into our lives." 53 We may add this is not only congruent with a certain Reformed position. It has, in one version or another, definite affinity with historic Christianity in both East and West.

Conclusion

There is adequate documentation to indicate that there is basic confusion among us as to how we, in churches of Christ, should read the Bible. We may be studying the Bible more (although in places that can be disputed), but we certainly appear to be enjoying it less. In these situations our tendency is to criticize what has been done in the past and look for new hermeneutical models.

We have proposed that we take a different course. As people of God, our more immediate task is not to find a new way to interpret the Bible but to rediscover our theological identity. In this paper we have attempted in no uncertain terms to spell out what that identity is; namely, our belief in the truth of the gospel and our insistence that its benefits are mediated to believers through observance of the ordinances of believer's baptism and the Lord's Supper. Out of this center we pursue rigorously the holy life.

Based on the proclamation of the gospel and our obedient response to it in the ordinances a basic theological foundation emerges that not only gives us identity but also serves as the basic discrimin which will allow us to make theological judgments today. It is our canon within the canon.

In this paper we have concentrated on one aspect of that foundation -- the Lord's Supper. We have shown how Paul used the tradition about it operative
in the early church as a hermeneutical tool to address problems in the local church. We should do the same.

Based on this view as to what constitutes our basic foundation and identity there is a particular need at this time to address issues among us on the nature of worship and ecclesiology. We restate a point we made earlier. What would it mean for us to think theologically about the form and conduct of the worship service, or the nature of our ethical lives, using the Lord's Supper as the basic criterion?

And we can go even farther. When we read the Bible in this light maybe we can at last, overcome the tendency to read it as a body of facts, a blueprint, or as a rule book for playing the ecclesiastical game. Then we may do what many believers have always done; read the text in such a way that the sheer mystery and wonder of God's faithfulness to his creation in the history of Israel and the life of Jesus overcomes and transforms us.

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1. This study is forthcoming in Restoration Quarterly. Quotations in my essay come from a draft of the paper in two parts: (1) The Rationalist/Inductive School; (2) The Historical/Contextual School.

2. Collier 1/10.


4. Collier 2/7-11.

5. A point also made by James Thompson, "New Testament Studies and the Restoration Movement," Restoration Quarterly, 25/4 (1982) 230-232. One may add that the call to biblical scholarship that is theologically incisive for the church can be a very different enterprise from the kind of biblical scholarship that is welcomed in many of the places of higher learning today. Much of the Academy, in an advanced state of secularization, goes to considerable lengths to eschew theological concerns.

6. Also, of related interest, is Tom Olbricht's on-going project of viewing the nineteenth century Restoration within the wider arena of biblical studies in America. Note his recent paper with references to many of his essays, "Alexander Campbell in the Context of American Biblical Studies, 1810-1874" (unpublished); also there is a resurgence of articles on specific hermeneutical points that have come up in our Rationalist era. Typical is W. Woodrow's "The Silence of Scripture and the Restoration Movement," R.Q. 28/1 (1985-86) 27-39; and finally a work that carries the flavor of the more traditional approaches operative in church history circles is Leonard Allen and Richard Hughes, Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ (Abilene: A.C.U. Press, 1988).

7. This is especially the case when we realize that there are few epistemic foundational beliefs which can be perceived as being indubitable today by mainstream philosophers. cf. Jeffrey Stout, The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality and the Quest for Autonomy (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) 29-36. This is a far cry from the nineteenth century American philosophical scene in which the Restoration Movement was nourished. In that context hermeneutical method was congruent with the widely held philosophy of Common Sense Realism. cf. Mark Ellingsen, "Common Sense Realism: The Cutting Edge of Evangelical Identity," Dialogue 24/3 (1985) 197-205.

In the nineteenth century the perspectival position of Immanuel Kant was ruled out of court by many American philosophers. Today, in many circles, the Kantian enterprise is reckoned to be too optimistic. Since any hermeneutical proposal will be scrutinized by philosophers, at least to see whether it is coherent, it is evident that today such proposals will be especially vulnerable to criticism in the current fragmented philosophical environment.
8. I refer here, at this point, to hermeneutics in the time honored sense of the science of interpretation of texts. We must, however, be aware that the term as used currently in theological circles is often the equivalent to "a basic theory of understanding." Since, to say the least, this is a highly volatile area in both philosophy and theology it seems wise not to rest the weight of a theological proposal anymore than is absolutely necessary in this area. For this paper, I use hermeneutics as the process of interpreting a theological argument or proposal.

9. Although I realize it has many problems (supposed "intentional fallacy, etc.), for theological purposes, I still see great value in the view presumed by the historical-critical method that the original purpose of the biblical author or editor must have priority in any attempt to reconstruct the "meaning" of a text. However, this does not rule out an important role for various synchronic methods which do alert us to important levels of meaning and nuances which take place somewhere between the text itself and the reader.

10. Allan J. McNicol, "Apostolicity and Holiness: The Basis for Christian Fellowship II," Mission 18/8 (1985) 19. These four marks of a legitimate fellowship are interpreted in the following way: (1) one (there was one fellowship founded by Christ); (2) catholic (the same thing is taught everywhere); (3) apostolic (the teachings of the apostles are normative); (4) holy (discipline is exercised with the expectation that the membership will have a lifestyle congruent with the gospel). Specifically, I have stressed that our theological center nuances apostolicity as being thought of as the restoration of the ancient gospel and ordinances of the church; the latter are given as a means of grace for the purpose of creating a people who live a lifestyle characterized by holiness.

11. James O. Duke, "The Disciples and the Lord's Supper," Encounter 50/1 (Winter, 1989) 4, has forcefully argued that for Campbell, "A Restoration of the ordinances of the new institution to their place and power," was the distinguishing mark of the new Reformation. We totally agree.

12. The question of the precise definition of ordinances is an interesting question. The nineteenth Restorationists, following earlier hermeneutical reflection in the Reformed tradition, tended to view the ordinances as positive commemorative institutions found in the New Testament that function as God's instrument to bring us to salvation. cf. Richard Harrison, "Early Disciples Sacramental Theology: Catholic, Reformed, and Free," Classic Themes of Disciple Theology, ed., Kenneth Lawrence (Fort Worth, T.C.U. Press, 1986) 50-51. They attempted to anchor this in Lockean philosophy and tended to list such things as preaching, reading of scripture, and praise as ordinances. cf. my article "Sorting Through the Confusion about Worship: An Appraisal of Two Paradigms," ICS Faculty Bulletin 8 (1987) 25. In the twentieth century, perhaps under the influence of Kerygmatic theologies, the ordinances essentially are viewed as two (baptism and the Lord's Supper).


265, called such a practice "impairing the rite." He had mainly Catholics in mind when he talked about their denial of the cup to the laity (before Vatican II), substitution of affusion for immersion, etc. Then he noted, "Such changes are dictated by preferences for expediency, and inevitably have the effect of weakening the objectivity of the sacrament action." This is precisely the case today in some circles in the church where the observance of the Supper is driven by sheer utilitarian needs.


16. This is my version of the three-fold warranting of theological claims in Anglicanism (Scripture; Tradition -- the Fathers and decisions of the Ecumenical Councils; and Reason). cf. The Study of Anglicanism, eds., Stephen Sykes and John Booty (London: SPCK/Fortress, 1988) 79-117. The Methodists use a four-fold arrangement: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. Other major groups have their own versions of these warrants.

I am well aware that this mode of "doing theology" may come as a surprise to some and thus its advantages need to be highlighted. By demanding these warrants for a theological proposal we both get out from under a too restrictive view of Sola Scriptura that cannot bear the weight we place upon it and allows us to be more "catholic" thus freeing the church from the grips of various cranks who have their own exegetical axes to grind. Indeed, before we bind our theological proposals on the church we had better be absolutely clear that they rest on very defensible warrants. Thus, our task is to move the theological enterprise from the hermeneutical methodologies that center on interpretation of texts, currently operative in the churches of Christ, to a different playing field (i.e. is something considered to be taught in Scripture by the broad-stream of the Restoration Movement and historic Christianity?).


19. It is my view that Dodd, "Sacrament," 70 is correct when he says that the Synoptic and Pauline accounts already reflected the actual liturgical practice in various geographical regions of the ancient church. In the case of Luke, we may have here evidence for several different liturgical remembrances of the rite -- if the manuscript evidence is any barometer.

20. The translation is that of Léon-Defour, *Eucharistic Bread,"* 110. Of course Paul meant by remembrance not the idea that Christ is to be repeatedly ritually sacrificed but that the action and effect of his once-and-for-all death is repeatedly represented in the observance of the Supper.

22. Léon-Dufour, "Eucharistic Bread," 208. He notes that behind this repulsion by Paul is probably the influence of Deut 32:15, 17, 21, 38.


26. Calvin L. Porter, "An Interpretation of Paul's Lord's Supper Texts: 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 and 11:17-34," Encounter 50/1 (1989) 42-43 notes, in the context of the Disciples of Christ, "I find little evidence that indicates that we employ the interpreted Lord's Supper tradition as a criterion for coming to terms with and deciding upon the issues vital to the life of the church .... When have the Disciples thought theologically and critically about moral and ethical issues with the Lord's Supper at the core of our reflection." That is a good question for churches of Christ as well!


28. Ibid., 303-331.

29. Ibid., 302-303.

30. Ibid., 305.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., 309-310. Here Campbell states well that the one presiding should break the loaf "not as the representative of the Lord but after his example."

33. Ibid., 316. The great bulk of his discussion in The Christian System was taken up with this issue.


36. Ibid., 406-407. Robinson probably goes overboard for our modern Free-church tastes; but in the light of current debates about the function of the assembly his explanation on the role of liturgical action at the assembly is worthwhile noting. He argues that from the time of the earliest liturgies the point was to present in successive acts before the worshippers the whole life of Jesus. This works out liturgically in the British churches in the following way. First, the congregation stands together in the presence of God in penitence and adoration; this is to identify the community with Israel waiting for the coming of the Messiah. While they wait they make confession of sin. Then
follows an act of praise (hymn) wherein they identify with the angels who hailed Jesus' coming. After that, the Word of God in prophecy and fulfillment is read. This symbolizes the incarnation of the Word of life among us. This is followed by the words of exhortation given on the basis of remembrance of Jesus' preaching among us. Then the mood changes. In the offertory and prayer the people begin to identify with his offering of his life. This culminates in the observance of the Supper. The service concludes with a hymn of triumph as the congregation goes forth to celebrate resurrection life.

37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
42. Ferguson, "Early Christians," 96-103.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 62.
46. Walter Scott, The Messiahship or Great Demonstration written for the Union of Christians, on Christian Principles, as Plead for in the Current Reformation (Kansas City: Old Paths Book Club Reproduction, first published 1859) 284.
47. The article by Bonnie Thurston, "DO THIS": A Study on the Institution of the Lord's Supper,' R.Q. 30/4 (1988) 207-217; although not directly addressing the practical situation in American churches of Christ, she rightfully stresses the importance of liturgical action in a Scriptural observance of the Lord's Supper.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.