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***Take time and read the following article to help prepare your hearts & minds for communion on September 14, 2025:***

### **The New Covenant Meal**

by Terry Johnson

One of the great insights of the Reformation was the recovery of the biblical concept of “covenant.” This recovery was fueled by the “new learning” of the Renaissance humanism, the return *ad fontes*, “to the sources,” of theology in the original texts of the New and Old Testaments and in the writings of the church fathers. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Muslim Turks brought a flood of Greek and Hebrew scholars with their manuscripts into Western Europe. For the first time in a thousand years in the West the Bible was being studied in the original languages, and in particular, the Old Testament was being given close attention. The expression, “Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched,” is well known and refers to his publication in 1516 of the first critical edition of the Greek New Testament, barely a year before the posting of the 95 Theses. Less well known is the fact that Luther was one of a handful of tri-linguists (Greek, Hebrew, Latin) on the whole continent of Europe. No longer would the church’s theologians be content to study the Bible in the Latin of the Vulgate.

The biblical covenants were given careful study by Zwingli, Bucer, Calvin, and Bullinger, often in relation to sacramental theology. What they came to understand was that the Lord’s Supper is a *supper*, that is, a covenantal meal. It should not

be understood as a *sacrifice* offered upon an altar by a priest, but a *supper* offered upon a table by a pastor. The Lord’s Supper is the Christian Passover in which, as with many covenantal meals before it, the agreement between the two participating parties is ratified or confirmed (Ex. 12:24; see also Gen. 14:17–20; 18:1–13; 27; Prov. 9:1–6). Jesus announced, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (1 Cor. 11:25; see Matt. 26:28). By participating in the meal, the covenant with Christ is ratified and confirmed, the Reformers argued. God confirms His promise to redeem those who come to Him through the cross of Christ. Communicants in turn promise to be faithful servants of the Christ whom they trust.

The practical implications of a covenantal understanding of the Eucharist were soon obvious: the communion service was to look like a meal. The language of sacrifice, as well as gestures and furnishings that implied sacrifice, were removed from the service: “Let us, therefore, repudiate everything that smacks of sacrifice,” Luther wrote in 1523 in his *Formula Missae*.

The pastoral implications were enormous as well. The communion table became the point at which commitment to Christ was either refused or ratified, and the people came to understand that if they were to do business with God it would be at the table. If you were a non-believer, Christ was beckoning you to His table. The Supper was a poignant reminder that one was outside of God’s covenant family and thus not a recipient of His saving provisions. If you were a baptized but non-

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communing child of the church, confirmation would take place at the table. The table for you was a reminder that though a covenant child, you had unfinished business with God. If you were a back-sliding Christian, rededication would take place at the table. The fenced table, excluding the unrepentant, was like a divine cannon-shot over the bow, warning you to get right with God. If you were a faithful believer, reaffirmation of the covenant with Christ would take place at the table. The table for you was a blessed spiritual meal, a reminder of the gifts of grace, and communion with the risen Christ Himself. The table was the Reformed altar-call. At the table, one was to deal with Christ, for there He was present, there He was most clearly seen, and there He issued His invitation to “take, eat,” “take, drink,” and enjoy His benefits.

The implications for *koinonia* soon became clear as well. By baptism one was initiated into the covenant. By participation in the Lord’s Supper one identified oneself as a member of the covenant community, in fellowship with Christ, and in fellowship with those in fellowship with Christ. Thus the apostle Paul writes: “Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:16–17 NASB). The unity of the church, mutual accountability, the mutual responsibility, the mutual caring and “sharing” (*koinonia*) are all implications of participation in one bread, one

cup, and one table of the covenantal meal.

We have perhaps made too little of the practical importance of the table. Perhaps this is especially true of first communion. I wonder if more ought to be made of this crucial step in a young person’s life of ratifying the covenant with Christ. I am not sure of what shape making more of first communion would take. But I do think we need to think and pray about what that might mean. Regularly observed, properly understood, and covenantally interpreted, the Lord’s Supper becomes the focal point of both one’s relationship with Christ, and one’s relationship with fellow believers.

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