

*Making a Meal of It: Rethinking the Theology of the Lord's Supper.* By Ben Witherington III. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008, 135 pp., \$15.69, paper.

Ben Witherington III, Amos Professor of New Testament for Doctoral Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary, is best known for his socio-rhetorical commentaries but also for attacking theological complacency with a light-hearted tone. *Making a Meal of It: Rethinking the Theology of the Lord's Supper* is the second of his three-part series on the sacraments. In his blog of September 13, 2007 (<http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/09/making-meal-of-it-rethinking-theology.html>), Witherington tells us that he intends to “encourage a going back ‘*ad fontes*’ . . . and rethinking our basic assumptions.”

Witherington begins with an examination of the Jewish Passover. He brings out the corporate remembrance of a turning away of God's wrath (rather than atonement for sin), and the celebration in the midst of home and family (rather than the temple). He then discusses meal customs of the first century, including the way ceremonies function to re-affirm membership in a group. Here and throughout the book, Witherington creatively uses modern allusions and humor which, while occasionally jolting, also help connect the reader with the past.

In chapter 2, after a brief survey of Jewish and Essene meals, Witherington offers a close reading of the Last Supper account in Mark and finds an event which was clearly a Passover, eaten in secret, communicating Jesus' understanding of himself as the sacrifice “inaugurating a new Passover . . . that sets people free, this time from sin” (26). Witherington interacts with Brian Capper, concluding that Luke's “shorthand” for the Lord's Supper was “the breaking of bread” (30), a fellowship meal which took place in homes. The struggle to bring scholarly material to a more popular audience is evident here. Often, Witherington succeeds admirably. Occasionally, however, the lack of outside references make his conclusions look speculative.

Chapter 3 begins with a description of Greco-Roman meals. Witherington's analysis of 1 Cor 10-11 in light of these conventions is detailed, but the exegetical organization makes the argument somewhat difficult to follow. He notes the typology in 1 Cor 10 and links 1 Cor 8-10 with “the decree of James” (43) in Acts 15. He goes on to describe the way all share “in the material and spiritual benefits of Christ's sacrifice” (45). He notes that the Lord's Supper was still taking place in homes as part of a larger meal, and that Paul was calling the Corinthians to “carry on in a way that comports with” “equality” (49). In a striking analysis of the self-examination directives, he shows that discernment refers to the cognizance “that this is a . . . group-building ceremony” (59).

In the next chapter, Witherington analyzes John 13-17 as a series of concatenated meals. He notes the reversal of status expressed in the footwashing ceremony. An explanation of the influence of Greco-Roman customs on Jews would have been a nice addition. Witherington then demonstrates that the Beloved Disciple was Lazarus and sees combining the footwashing, the Passover meal, and the betrayal of Judas as a way to emphasize mutual compassion and forgiveness. This chapter deftly handles a wealth of information and sources.

After a quick look at other NT references, Witherington examines the evidence of the Didache. He notes the “author’s primary concern” with “prayer” (92), but also that the Lord’s Supper was celebrated in the context of a community meal with an eschatological focus, open only to the baptized, where the “unity of Jesus’ followers” (93) is in view. He also brings out the lack of any “magical view of the elements” (94) or continuing connection to a Passover meal.

In chapter 6, Witherington looks at 2<sup>nd</sup> Century practices, noting first of all their diversity. He points out the “trend towards more literalism” (109), although not to the extent of later centuries. New issues did cause changes, however, specifically the move of the Lord’s Supper from a lay celebration in homes to a clerically controlled ceremony in a church. Further, growing anti-Judaism brought a re-interpretation of the OT as a blueprint for Christian communities which increased the power of the clergy and removed women from participation.

Chapter 7 starts by noting that “[h]istorians of ritual will tell you that when the symbols change, the social reality . . . is changing, as well” (114). Thus, the move from a common loaf to a wafer and “the reserving” of “the wine” “for the priest” shifted the emphasis away from “the unity of the body” (114). Witherington then traces the development of the doctrine of transubstantiation up through the Council of Trent and critiques it, saying, “It is . . . the person of Christ, not his body parts . . . that one worships if one is a Christian” (120). Moving on to the Reformers, he does an admirable job of nuancing Luther and Zwingli’s views, noting Luther’s move towards “consubstantiation” (122) and Zwingli’s emphasis on “fellowship within the community of faith” (123).

In his last chapter, Witherington attempts to “craft both a theology and practice of the Lord’s supper” (125). He begins by asserting that “the Lord’s Supper should be a memorable corporate act of the people of God” (127). He suggests that holding the Lord’s Supper in the context of a fellowship meal included in the worship service would “add back the element of *koinōnia*,” and that the use of one loaf which is broken would restore the “double symbol” “of Christ’s own body” and “of the church as the body of Christ” (131). He takes approaching “this meal in a worthy manner” to be a realization “that this is *our occasion to share a meal with Jesus*” (133 emphasis original) and strikingly links this to the disciples’ encounter with Jesus on the Emmaus Road. He suggests the celebration be accompanied by “a renewal of good preaching” on “the Lord himself and his salvific work” (141).

While this work contains less references than one might have hoped, its renewal of a vision of the Lord’s Supper as a corporate celebration as well as its accessibility make it a much-welcome addition to current works on ecclesiology.

Laura Hunt and J. Brian Tucker  
Michigan Theological Seminary, Plymouth, MI