

Breathing New Life into Communion: More than a Funeral

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- I. One of the identifying marks of Churches of Christ is our emphasis on weekly Communion. This same emphasis however is giving some churches difficulties.
 - A. As churches try to get more “contemporary,” they find the Lord’s Supper gets in the way.
 1. Many contemporary services try to keep everything upbeat, positive, fast paced, and communion is a downer.
 2. What do we do with all of this silence and talk of crucifixion?
 - B. In other congregations, I hear of fights over singing during the Lord’s Supper or even utilizing women to pass the Communion.
- II. I think the root of these problems is the same. **We have not explored with our congregations a theology of the Lord’s Supper.**
 - A. In the church where I grew up, we did not talk about a theology of anything.
 - B. Our discussions of the Lord’s Supper concerned when we took it, how often we took it, red or purple grape juice (never wine), individual cups or one cup, Sunday morning or Sunday evening, and that “separate and apart” discussion – all mechanical concerns, ritual observance.
 - C. We learned our theology by listening to Lord’s Supper prayers and watching those around us take the supper.
 1. Heads bowed, eyes closed.
 2. Very, very quiet. Don’t even think of unwrapping that peppermint during these 10 minutes.
 3. The older males usually led the prayers, two in number, but any baptized male believer could serve, with the youngest usually on the ends.
 4. “Our Father in Heaven, we thank you for this bread, which to us as Christians symbolizes the broken body of our savior hung on the cross for our sins. Help our minds to go back to Calvary as we partake.”
 5. “Our father in Heaven, thank you for this cup which is emblematic of the blood of Jesus shed on the cruel cross for our sins. May we remember that he suffered for us as we drink this cup. In Jesus’ name, amen.
 - a) Broken body – show me that in scripture.
 - b) Emblematic, partake – now those are church words aren’t they.
 - c) Celebrate – when was the last time you allowed celebration during the Supper?
 - d) Observe – are we supposed to be observers, or participants.
 6. One of my elders recently told an illustrative story. His family had a family reunion and had their own worship. Two of the teenage sons who had never before served communion were asked to do so that morning. One son prayed a prayer like those above just as fluidly as you could desire. My elder’s son, who is normally quite poised, stumbled all over himself. In reflection the elder discovered why. His son, raised at our congregation where no two communion prayers are the same, had never thought through a communion prayer. The other young man, raised in a

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very traditional congregation, had heard the same communion prayer over and over and could recite it without thinking.

- D. We have established a funeral theology and a funeral setting.
 - 1. We are to be silent, reverent, preferably with a tear in your eye.
 - 2. We also consider the supper to be between just the participant and God. It is a private observance.
 - 3. The reason we don't like singing is that it disturbs the funeral atmosphere and interferes with the private participation.
- E. Our theology of communion comes through this inherited practice, which, though Biblical, is quite incomplete.

III. Holding that thought, **let's think historically.**

- A. We tend to think that if Paul and Barnabas worshipped with us next Sunday they would feel right at home and know exactly what we were doing. I suggest to you that they would be as uncomfortable with our assembly as we would be with theirs.
- B. For the first few centuries of Christianity, there were no church buildings.
 - 1. Churches were house churches, meeting primarily in homes.
- C. Not until Constantine in the 4th century was Sunday a day off.
 - 1. So the church met in the dark. A person worked from sunup to sundown.
- D. The church was also an illegal underground movement for most of its first 300 years.
 - 1. No one put a sign up saying "The church meets here." That was an invitation to arrest and possibly death.
- E. So we have an illegal movement, maximum of 25-30 people, meeting quietly in homes, in the dark.
- F. We have two descriptions of such assemblies: 1 Cor. 11-14 and Acts 20.
 - 1. Acts 20:7+
 - a) 1st day of the week.
 - b) Purpose: to break bread
 - c) Upper room
 - d) Paul discussed, dialogued (2 way) with them (vs. 7, 11)
 - e) A meal
 - 2. 1 Cor. 11-14
 - a) Centrality of the Lord's Supper. The picture of the supper is that of a meal, not a ritual pinch and sip.
 - (1) The haves assembled in the afternoon and ate up, while the workers could not come until after dark and the best food was gone.
 - (2) The abuse of the meal demonstrated the lack of social equality that divided the church. Paul was stressing table fellowship as an indication of the universal love that bound people in Christ.
 - (3) Everyone would bring what he could to share: the wealthy brought the meats, the poor whatever they could, probably the bread or less costly items.
 - b) Tongue speaking, interpretation

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- c) Prayer
- d) Singing (chant style, not our 4 part harmony)
- e) Revelation, lesson, prophecy.

- 3. The early church is never described as assembling to worship. Worship was the formal praise of the temple, now the lifestyle of the Christian. The early church did not go to worship, they were worship (Rom. 12:1)
- 4. The early church did assemble to break bread (Acts 20:7), and there is an emphasis, especially in 1 Cor. 11-14 on encouragement and building up.

G. The best picture we have of early Christian worship is that the Lord's Supper was a pot-luck meal enjoyed by all who assembled, and during that meal the Lord was remembered in the most common food elements: bread and wine.

H. When we understand this first century practice, the closest example most of us have are our Care Groups or LIFE groups that your congregation may have. In that context so many of our discussions concerning singing during communion or whether or not women can serve look very different.

- 1. Part of our problem is translating 1st century house church informality into the edifice centered formal church-temple practice that is our current practice.
- 2. Isn't it interesting that we, who claim to be restoring the NT practice, find that practice so objectionable?

IV. A third consideration: **Many of our churches have fixed procedure concerning worship order and sermon that tends to make each "element" of worship distinct.**

- A. For instance, a sermon is to last 25-30 minutes and conclude with an invitation.
- B. I enjoyed, and my congregation seemed to enjoy, was breaking my sermon into sections. If I had three distinct points, why not preach three 8-minute sermons, and have each reinforced with hymns and readings for that point.
- C. Or if you are preaching on unity, why not preach part of that sermon, have the Lord's Supper together with its unity emphasis, then conclude the message and lead to an invitation.
- D. Or, if you are preaching to the choir, conclude the sermon with readings or songs that reinforce the point and then get up at a later point and extend an invitation.
- E. My point is to plan the entire service around your theme rather than seeing the various elements as "separate and apart." In this format, the preacher and the worship leader become the "MCs" connecting the various elements and making spiritual points all through the assembly.
- F. Of course this takes much forethought and planning.

V. Summary:

- A. Our theology has been primarily driven by Lord Supper prayers, songs, and watching others.
- B. We fail to see the wider biblical context of the Lord's Supper.
- C. We are sermon centered and not assembly centered – we should strive for an intertwined focus in our assemblies.

VI. I suggest to you this morning that communion, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist (as many groups call it), can and should embody the whole gospel. Or another way of putting it, anything that is a valid topic for preaching, can and should be connected to the Lord's Table.

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- A. If that thesis is correct, then every service can, in some way use the Lord's Supper to reinforce the theme of the day.
- B. Now wait a minute, how can a sermon on marriage be connected to the Lord's Supper?
 - 1. Wedding feast of the lamb, bride of Christ, Wedding at Cana, unity – All Lord's Supper contexts.

VII. To illustrate me point, allow me to point out some of the emphasis given to the Communion in the early centuries.

A. **Thanksgiving** to the Father

- 1. Lord's Supper called the Eucharist, from *eucharistos*, grateful--thankful.
- 2. (Mat 26:27 NRSV) *Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you;*
- 3. In the Eucharist, the church expresses its thankfulness for all God's benefits.
- 4. We recognize the abundance of that blessing and are satisfied in the Lord, John 6:11-12.
- 5. Earliest Christian worship, Justin Martyr (A. D. 150)
 - a) Reading of the word & sermon: a gift from God.
 - b) Prayer: a gift of response.
 - c) The Lord's Supper (a meal?): a gift from God
 - d) The contribution: a gift of response.

B. **Remembrance** of Christ, a memorial of Christ.

- 1. *anamnesis*, recollection--remembrance (again).
- 2. (Luke 22:19 NRSV) *Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."* Parallel 1 Cor. 11:24.
- 3. I remember my Grandfather: - fishing trips, his garden, the fig tree, the blackbird pie, dominoes, the Gillett fight of the week. I don't remember him lying in his coffin.
- 4. The idea is that of a memorial, a monument of reminder, our "ebineezer."
- 5. Remember the fullness of Christ: Incarnation, servanthood, ministry, teaching, suffering, sacrifice, resurrection, ascension.

C. **Proclamation** of Jesus to the world, a weekly witness.

- 1. It is a drama, a reenacting of the Last Supper.
- 2. It is a witness to the world of a united people.
- 3. 1 Cor. 11:26: "Proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." Proclaim the results of his death and the surety of his return.
- 4. Every time the congregation gathers, it acts out the essential features of how the world is supposed to be and it proclaims Jesus as central to our identity.

D. **Communion, Presence** with Christ.

- 1. *koinonia*, partnership, participation, communion, fellowship.
- 2. (1 Cor 10:16-17 NRSV) *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? ¹⁷ Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*
- 3. (Mat 26:20 NRSV) *When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve;*

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4. The name, when connected to the mental image, produces the person or thing. This is the idea of the Lord's Supper: releasing the power and personality of Jesus afresh.
5. Luke 22, Road to Emmaus, (Luke 24:30-22, NRSV) *When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.* ³¹ *Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.* ³² *They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"*

E. **Communion of the faithful**, unity, and fellowship.

1. The Lord's Supper has to do with the whole church and is incomplete as a private devotion. "Wait for one another." "Church met to break bread." I Cor. 11:18-34, esp. 33.
2. The Supper demands reconciliation and sharing among all those regarded as brothers and sisters. It is a demonstration of human redemption. The emphasis on one oneness.
 - a) (1 Cor 10:17 NRSV) *Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*
 - b) (1 Cor 11:29 NRSV) *For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.*
 - c) (1 Cor 12:12 NRSV) *For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.*
3. Egotism is condemned among those partaking.
 - a) Mat 5:23-24, Be reconciled to your brother, then offer your gift
 - b) 1 Cor 5:6-8, no room for malice and evil.
 - c) John 13, washing feet.
 - d) Luke 22, Arguments over greatness.
4. The emphasis in the NT on eating meat offered to idols and to proper meat preparation (Acts 15:20, 29) is to enable table fellowship, i.e. breaking bread together (1. Cor. 8:4+, Rom. 14:13+.)
5. Our relationships affect the power of the supper.

F. A **Kingdom meal**

1. The church, as the present kingdom, is a foretaste of the eternal kingdom.
2. A rich study for anyone is the "theology of kingdom meals." Search for words like supper, dinner, feast, banquet, bread, and notice how many times it is in the context of covenants, religious celebrations, and praise to God.
3. The Kingdom meal, Messianic Banquet as the time of redemption.
 - a) Isa. 25:6-9 *On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.*
 - b) Rev 19:9 *"Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are true words of God."*
 - c) Ps. 23; Luke 14:15⁺
 - d) Luke 5, Call of Levi
 - e) Luke 7, woman who washes Jesus' feet.

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- f) Luke 9, feeding 5000, followed by, "Who do the crowds say I am?" John puts this story on a mountain in the dessert at Passover with unlimited food - tremendous messianic imagery.
- g) Luke 14:15-16 *One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" {16} Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many.*
- h) Luke 15: three banquets of salvation.
- i) Luke 16, rich man and Lazarus.
- j) Luke 22, Upper room
- k) Luke 24, Road to Emmaus.

G. Passover

- 1. Exodus 24, meal of the covenant, meal of freedom and salvation. Passover is a *Celebration of Freedom*, the Jewish 4th of July, and is a feast, not a fast.
- 2. Jesus as Paschal lamb, sacrificed for the salvation of the people. (1 Cor 5:7-8 NRSV) *Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*
- 3. Looking back at what God has done
- 4. Thanking God for what he is doing.
- 5. Looking forward to what he will do.

H. Marriage Feast, Wedding Feast.

- 1. Rev 19:9 *"Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are true words of God."*
- 2. John 2:1-12, Water to wine at Cana.
- 3. God's people are portrayed in marriage terminology.
 - a) Isa 62:5 *For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.*
 - b) Jer 2:2 *Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD: I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.*
 - c) Jer 2:32 *Can a girl forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet my people have forgotten me, days without number.*
 - d) Ezek 16:8 *I passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness: I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord GOD, and you became mine.*
 - e) Hosea
 - f) Rev 19:7 *Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready;*

I. The cup represents the **Blood of the covenant**

- 1. Exo 24:8 *Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, "See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."*

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2. Mat 26:27-28 *Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; {28} for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*
3. Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:26-27; Zech. 9:11; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor 3:3-6; Heb 9:19+; 10:16-18, 23-31
4. The New covenant involves an urge from the inside to be faithful to the relationship with God in contrast to the old commandment from the outside. That urge is the presence of the Holy Spirit. In the new covenant, God assumes responsibility for enabling humans to relate faithfully to him.

J. A **Covenant meal**

1. Notice how many covenants in scripture involve food.
 - a) Garden of Eden & expulsion, Tree of life, Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.
 - b) Cain and Abel's sacrifice, Gen. 4:3.
 - c) Noah is rewarded with a rainbow and meat to eat. Gen. 9:3.
 - d) Abraham feasts with the men who promise him a son. Gen. 18:6.
 - e) Joseph's Egyptian encounters with his brothers centered around food.
 - f) Passover was sealed with food. Ex. 12.
 - g) The provisions of God are manna, quail, and water.
 - h) Moses and the elders of Israel ate and drank with God at Sinai. Ex. 24:11.
 - i) Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles were feast times. The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) was a fast.
2. We pledge ourselves to God, and eat and drink at his table.

K. It is a time of **judgment**. The Lord's Supper demands that our behavior be consistent with our teaching.

1. It is also a judgment on the limitations of our fellowship (1 Cor. 11).
2. If communion is to happen, confrontation cannot be avoided since our exclusiveness, our self-concern, our self-centeredness, must be confronted if we are to die to our selfishness and rise to community. 1 Cor. 11:27-28
3. Luke wants to ensure us that Judas is present at the Lord's Supper. A traitor could partake of the Lord's Supper and still be a betrayer. Presence at the Lord's table does not guarantee purity. The meal possesses no magical powers. (1 Cor 10:20-21).
4. The Supper calls us to honesty: Jude 1:12; 2 Pet 2:12-14; 1 Cor 10:21

L. A **life-giving** meal, a transfusion

1. (John 6:51 NRSV) *I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.* (John 6:54-56 NRSV) *Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day;*⁵⁵ *for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.*⁵⁶ *Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.*
2. Life is in Jesus. The bread and wine are to remind us of the real source of life.

M. Reminder of **God's provision**

1. (John 6:12 NRSV) *When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost."* (John 6:31) *Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to*

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eat.", (John 6:48-50 NRSV) *I am the bread of life.* ⁴⁹ *Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.* ⁵⁰ *This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.*

N. Assurance of **forgiveness** of sins.

1. (Mat 26:28 NRSV) *for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*
2. Forgiveness is tied to the cross, the assumption of our sins by Jesus in his death. The Lord's Supper celebrates the forgiveness we have experienced.
3. Luke 15: the feast of the shepherd, the woman, and the father. Forgiveness and repentance is celebrated with a feast.

O. **Demonstration of the love** of God

1. (John 13:1 NRSV) *Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*
2. The grace and love of God are demonstrated in the meal where we are invited without merit. Luke 14:15⁺; Luke 15.

P. Expression of **Anticipation and Assurance**.

1. We look forward to the heavenly table of the Lord, the final Messianic Banquet, the wedding feast of the lamb. Isa. 25:6-9; Luke 14:15⁺; Rev 19:9.
2. We celebrate, until he comes, 1 Cor. 11:26.
3. The Lord's Supper is foretaste of the resurrection, (John 6:54 NRSV) *Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day;*

Q. A Meal of **Service**.

1. We serve each other,
 - a) (Luke 22:19-20 NRSV) *Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."* ²⁰ *And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.*
 - b) John 10:17-18 *For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. {18} No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.*
 - c) (John 13:5-6 NRSV) *Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.* ⁶ *He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"*
2. Jesus was host, serving his guests, pouring and giving for us.

R. A **Sacrificial** meal, a meal of suffering

1. (Luke 22:15 NRSV) *He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer;*
2. Numerous sacrificial illusions to Jesus as the Passover lamb, sacrificed for us.
3. Mat 16:24 *Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*
4. Rom 8:17 *heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ--if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*

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5. Phil 1:29 *For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well--*

S. **Core ritual**, a legacy

1. On a par with the apostles teaching, fellowship, and prayer (Acts. 2:42)
2. The church at Troas met weekly to break bread (Acts 20:7-12)
3. Paul passed on what he had received (1 Cor. 11:23)

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