

The Lord's Supper at Faith Presbyterian Church No. 10
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Review

We are just about finished with this series on the practice of the Lord's Supper. I know that some of you have wearied of this concentration on what may seem to you to be details. However, we are, as you know anticipating making changes in our practice and it was necessary, I felt, that we consider the matter carefully before doing so. I wanted not only to cover the material with you but to bear my own witness to you of the care with which matters of Christian worship ought to be considered. What is more, to be entirely honest, we had not – your elders, Pastor DeMass, and I – we had not come to final conclusions regarding the changes that we would make. We needed ourselves to consider this material and judge the significance of it for our practice here. We have done that now and know what changes we will make (with only a detail here or there still to be decided). I will report our decisions to you next time. But, remember, particularly since we will not visit this material again in this detail, remember that these are larger questions than may at first appear. They not only bear in a significant way on our own experience of and profit from the Lord's Supper – surely a most important matter for any serious Christian who wants the largest possible measure of God's blessing in his or her life – but these matters have long divided Christians from one another. Controversies about the Lord's Supper, controversies which in large part were expressed *in the way the Lord's Supper was practiced in churches* have bloodied the Christian church for ages. Listen to this from A.B. Bruce.

“The history of these controversies is very humiliating, and their consequences most disastrous. Through them the symbol of union has been turned into a chief cause of division. The church has remembered her Lord and obeyed his commandment of love, as members of families sometimes remember a deceased parent, casting angry glances at each other across his grave, and retiring to the house, whose head they have buried, to squabble about the meaning of his will.” [*The Training of the Twelve*, 357]

And this from Dom Dix [*The Shape of the Liturgy*, 614] just in regard to the controversy over the Lord's Supper in the Anglican Church's history.

“Two archbishops of Canterbury have lost their lives and a third his see in these quarrels. One king has been beheaded and another dethroned; many lesser men have suffered all manner of penalties from martyrdom downwards on one side and another.”

The way we view the Lord's Supper and the way we practice it not only express but shape our Christian faith, how we understand our salvation and the way we are to live by faith in Jesus Christ. Worship and the way we worship conveys the nature of our faith very powerfully to our hearts and to the hearts of our children. We cannot think too carefully about these things. Now, we conclude our historical survey of the way in which the Supper has been taken, concentrating now on developments since the time of the Reformation in our Protestant, Reformed tradition.

We have been considering of late the different ways in which the Lord's Supper has been celebrated in Christendom through the ages. We've looked at what evidence can be extracted from the NT itself, which never actually describes a Christian Lord's Supper, at several descriptions of early Christian Lord's Supper from the centuries immediately following the apostolic period, and then, last time, from the middle ages and the era of the Reformation. We have already seen that at the time of the Reformation new approaches were introduced. While Calvin still had his parishioners come to the front of the church and receive and commune there (while a Psalm was being chanted or a passage of Scripture read), Zwingli introduced the practice of serving the congregation in their seats, first in silence and then later with the Scripture being read.

Now, we turn to summarize, and that is all we can do, the practice of our own Presbyterian/Puritan tradition.

In Scotland communion at a table quickly became the norm and remained so for several centuries. Here is the account of a Scottish communion in the 1620s by the famous early church historian of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, David Calderwood.

“Among us, the Minister, when the sermon is finished, reads the words of institution, gives a short exhortation and admonition, then blesses. The...thanksgiving ended, he says, ‘Our Lord, on the night in which he was betrayed, took bread, and gave thanks, as we have already done, and brake, as I also now break, and gave to his disciples, saying (then he hands it to those nearest on the right and left), This is my Body, etc.’ He adds nothing to the words of Christ, changes nothing, omits nothing. Then those next break a particle off the larger fragment or part, and hand what is left to those sitting nearest, so long as there is any portion of the fragment over. Then those who serve the Tables [he means not that there was more than one physical table, but that the same table was filled up a number of times by people coming to commune], when one fragment is done, offer the paten, from which another in like manner takes a similar fragment...and breaking, hands to the next, and so on. In like manner the Minister delivers the cup to those nearest, repeating the words of Christ...and when the wine is done, those who serve fill it anew. As soon as he has delivered both elements to those sitting nearest him...the Minister, as long as the action of eating and drinking lasts, addresses those at Table.... Whilst they are rising from the Table and others are taking their place the Minister is silent, and those leaving and those approaching the Table, together with the whole congregation either sing or the Reader reads the history of the Passion. But when the Minister is speaking and when the communicants hand to one another the elements neither is the history of the Passion read nor Psalms sung.... If the whole communicants could sit at one time at the Tables, it would be more agreeable and advantageous, as they could thus all together eat, drink, meditate, sing, and hear the Minister's address.... In this form our Church has now for sixty years celebrated the Holy Supper.” [From W.D. Maxwell, *A History of Worship in the Church of Scotland*, 63]

One point worth mentioning by the way is that churches have long been built on the basis of a particular liturgical practice. Churches in which the people come to the front to receive communion are built with room in the front for the passage of people and, in some cases, with

provision made for numbers of people to kneel at the front of the church at the same time to receive the bread and wine. The building was designed with a view to the way in which worship would be conducted in it. Scottish churches used to have very large chancels – the area at the end of the church reserved for pulpit and table – because they typically had very large tables situated there for their Lord’s Supper services. Our church, as you can easily see, was not designed for the congregation to move at all once it had taken its place in the pews. The only movement really provided for architecturally was that of the bride. The new churches built in the amphitheater format, semi-circles around a large front platform, often with a sloping floor, are nowadays often built with no thought of weddings either, there being no central aisle. It is not the movement of the congregation but its being situated in front of what is now called without embarrassment, “the stage.” Many changes that our churches may well wish to make to their way of worship in coming years they will find harder to make because their sanctuaries were not designed to accommodate those changes.

One feature of the Scottish Presbyterian communion service was that it was very long. That was not so much of a problem for them in those days because communion was infrequently observed, usually no more than four times per year and in not a few cases only once a year. John Wesley, on a preaching tour of Scotland, once participated in a Scottish communion service and didn’t think too much of it. It will be good for our humility to hear him lambast our own tradition.

“Being...informed that the Lord’s Supper was to be administered in the West Kirk I knew not what to do; but at length I judged it best to embrace the opportunity, though I did not admire the manner of administration. After the usual morning service, the minister enumerated several sorts of sinners, who he forbade to approach. Two long tables were set on the sides of one aisle, covered with table-cloths. On each side of them a bench was placed for the people. Each table held four or five and thirty. Three ministers sat at the top, behind a cross table, one of whom made a long exhortation, closed with the words of our Lord; and then, breaking the bread, gave it to him who sat on each side of him. ... He broke off a little piece, and gave the bread to the next; and so it went on, the deacons giving more when wanted. A cup was then given to the first person on each bench, and so by one to another. The minister continued his exhortation all the time they were receiving; then four verses of the twenty-second Psalm [vv. 25-28?], while the new persons sat down at the table. A second minister then prayed, consecrated, and exhorted. I was informed the service usually lasted till five in the evening. How much more simple, as well as more solemn, is the service of the Church of England!” [In Maxwell, 173-174]

Table communion continued to be the norm until, through the immense influence and prestige of Thomas Chalmers, pew communion was introduced in his parish, St. John’s in Glasgow. At first the backs of the pews were covered with what were called “houceling cloths”, that is table cloths such as might have covered the communion table, to represent symbolically the presence of the people at the table. This was a practice that had been used in Congregational and even some Anglican churches and was a half-way position to entice traditional Scottish Presbyterians away from the ancient practice of communion at table. Over time the cloths disappeared and today Scottish Presbyterian churches practice pew communion in the main. The main effect of this

change, of course, was to reduce the length of communion services, sometimes by many hours! [Maxwell, 172]

There was more variety among the English Puritans of the 16th and 17th centuries. Interestingly, just as the Scots argued that as the first Lord's Supper was taken around a table so should the Christian Lord's Supper that followed, so a number of Puritans argued that since the first Lord's Supper was a night, so should Christian communion services. [Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 205-207]

What is perhaps also interesting and important to admit is that, though the Puritans fiercely criticized the Anglicans because their worship and their Lord's Supper did not conform to the pattern of the NT, they themselves differed widely as to what the proper form of Lord's Supper really was. [So arguments today among PCA men who are sure that other PCA folk are violating the "regulative principle" but who can't agree among themselves precisely what the regulative principle requires in worship!] They differed among themselves over the frequency of communion (some communicated every Sunday some much less frequently), over whether the communion was to be at a table or in the seats where the congregation had been the rest of the service, whether there should be a separate prayer before the wine as there was prayer before the bread, whether there should be silence during the communion itself or the reading of Scripture or the singing of a Psalm, and so on. The Westminster Assembly, by the way, debated the question of whether the communion should be at the Table as the Scot commissioners argued strenuously, but at the end they failed to persuade and the Directory of Worship doesn't address the question.

Here is an interesting account of a Lord's Supper service in a London Presbyterian Church near the end of the 1600s found in the diary of a New Englander who was visiting the old country.

"The [Minister] went all over the meeting first, to see who was there, then spake something of the sermon [i.e. a brief summary], then read the words of Institution, then prayed and eat and drink himself, then gave to every one with his own Hand, dropping pertinent Expressions. In our Pue [sic] said – Now our Spikenard should give its smell; and said to me, Remember the Death of Christ... The Deacon followed the [Minister], and when his Cup was empty filled it again: as at our Pue all had drunk but I, he filled the Cup, and then gave it to me; said, as he gave it – Must be ready in new Obedience, and stick at nothing for Christ." [Davies, 210]

By the end of the 17th century at least that Presbyterian Church had given up Table communion and had gone to pew communion, but the minister himself served each pew and offered comments to each individual communicant.

The Puritans of New England followed the prevailing pattern that had been employed back in England. Here is John Cotton's account of the communion service in Massachusetts in 1645.

"In time of solemnization of the Supper, the Minister having taken, broken, and blessed the bread, and commanded all the people to take and eate it, as the body of Christ broken for them, he taketh it himself, and giveth it to all that sit at Table with him, and from the

Table it is reached by the Deacons to the people sitting in the next seats about them, the Minister sitting in his place at the Table.

After they have all partaked in the bread, hee taketh the cup in like manner, and *giveth thanks a new*...according to the example of Christ in the Evangelist, who describes the institution Mat. 26.27 Mark 14.23 Luk. 22.17 All of them in such a way as setteth forth the Elements, not blessed *together*, but either of them *apart*; the bread first by it selfe, and afterwards the wine by it selfe; for what reason the Lord himselfe knoweth....

After the celebration of the Supper, a Psalme of thanksgiving is sung, (according to Mat. 26.30) and the Church dismissed with a blessing.” [*The Way of the Churches*, 68, cited in Horton Davies, *The Worship of the American Puritans*, 189-190]

In his account of the New England Lord's Supper Cotton makes a point of emphasizing that they sat to commune. The Puritans had rejected kneeling as implying the adoration of the bread and wine after the catholic manner. So they had sat. Now, however, they found a theological reason for sitting. It represents, Cotton said, that Christians will sit with Jesus to exercise judgment on the last day (Luke 22:27-30). That is something that has often happened in the history of debates about worship. A custom is formed in reaction to something and then, later, is justified in some other way. For example, Hughes Oliphant Old has written some very fine works on Reformed worship over the last few years. He defends the practice of pew communion as an exercise in Christian fellowship. Each of us passes the bread and wine to the other so we are, as it were, receiving Christ from our brothers and sisters. Now that is a nice thought, but no one should think that had anything to do with why Presbyterians and Puritans began to sit to take communion. They sat in order not to kneel. Only later did they find justifications for their practice. While before Puritans sat or stood to show that posture wasn't important, now, according to Cotton, they sat because posture *was* important. [Davies, *The Worship of the American Puritans*, 188] Of course, the New Englanders practiced a communion of what they called “visible saints” and, in practice that meant that if you were not from that particular church, you would have to see an elder and he would then have to submit your name to the congregation for approval, apparently by having the names of such people who wished to communicate but who were not of that congregation read out at the beginning of the Lord's Supper service. [191] Otherwise, the people not included in the Supper left after the first part of the worship service was concluded, unless they wished to stay and watch the Supper [190] So, fencing the table was managed by the regulation that only those positively permitted could participate.

It is not hard to see in this service the makings of the Reformed/Presbyterian service that would prevail in the new world. Communion in the pews, ministerial administration with help from deacons (or elders) to distribute the bread and wine.

But some variety would still be found. You have found it yourself. Sometimes the people are told to wait and to eat the bread and then drink the wine at the same time. This is apparently a way of at least attempting the symbolic preservation of one loaf and one cup. Some churches have two prayers, one for the bread and one for the wine, and many do not. Our Presbyterian Church in America *Directory for Worship* stipulates but one prayer for both elements (58-5). However, it assumes a traditional practice that has been dispensed with in many PCA churches

by this time. You could never accurately describe the PCA communion service by reproducing it from the *Directory of Worship*. It assumes an infrequent Supper (it asks for a service of spiritual preparation during the week previous to the Lord's Supper), it assumes either table communion or pew communion, but not the other forms now widely found in PCA churches.

For, the fact is, all sorts of practices can now be found in our churches. Some still use a table or tables. The Independent Presbyterian Church of Savannah, GA where a friend of mine and Dick Hannula now pastors – he is PCA though the church is not – has for ages on communion Sundays placed tables down the length of the sanctuary's wide central aisle. I'm not sure how often they have the Lord's Supper but it is no more than once a month. The church has a central aisle apparently purpose-built wide enough to accommodate that communion service. There are small PCA churches that take the Supper around tables in a church hall or even in a sanctuary. There is a church in this Presbytery that distributes the elements to the congregation standing in a circle around the perimeter of the sanctuary, each handing first the bread and then the wine to the person standing next to him or her. There are a growing number of churches, including a number of newer churches, in which the congregation comes to the front to receive, usually receiving the bread and wine standing, but sometimes kneeling. It is a day of liturgical flux. Probably most PCA churches still practice less frequent communion and pew communion, but the number of churches with that traditional practice is, I suspect, decreasing all the time.

Now our *Directory for Worship* says, in a very traditional Presbyterian way, "Since believers are to act personally in all their covenanting with the Lord, it is proper that a part of the time occupied in the distribution of the elements should be spent by all in silent communion, thanksgiving, intercession and prayer." (58-6). Now there doesn't seem very much that is controversial in such a statement, but that is what I want you to think with me about as we conclude. It is not obvious from the Bible, nor, even, from the historic practice of the Christian church, nor even from the historic practice of Reformation churches, including our own Puritan/Presbyterian churches, that "silent communion, thanksgiving, intercession, and prayer" are an integral part of the biblical idea of the Lord's Supper. We said before that our service does encourage the communicant to think that private meditation is the key to the practice of the Lord's Supper.

But I have also suggested that it may well be that the reason we think that is simply that our form of taking the Lord's Supper leaves us sitting in our pews waiting for a good bit of the time. What else is to be done in such a situation but private meditation and prayer. Surely, there is never anything wrong with private meditation and prayer. But, nothing that is said in the NT either in its accounts of the original institution of the Supper the night of the Lord's betrayal or in its other statements about the Supper suggests that the Supper is a time or occasion for private meditation and prayer. All we are told, all we know is that it is the eating of the bread and the drinking of the wine as an act of faith in Christ present to feed and nourish our souls. Other forms of communion than pew communion have tended to stress the eating and drinking more than the meditation: table communion did – you came, sat down, listened, ate and drank, and got up – and so did communion at the front of the church – after the institution and prayer you rose and walked forward and the whole emphasis fell on the action of eating and drinking. Interestingly, this seems to have been the effect as well of having reading or singing during the

actual communion. It precisely did not leave communicants alone with their thoughts and prayers.

Now, of course, we are not against prayer and meditation. The question is whether in the corporate service of worship and the corporate sacrament of the Lord's Supper private prayer and meditation is really what is called for. I do not think that the Scripture teaches us to think that it is. The communion is an eating and drinking. We will speak next, in our final study, about what that means and what it is for and how we ought to think about it.