

The Lord's Supper at Faith Presbyterian Church No. 9
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Review

We are now considering the way the Lord's Supper has been celebrated in Christian churches through the ages. We looked at what information is given us in the NT itself and then, last time, at some descriptions of early Christian Lord's Suppers. Obviously, it would take far too long to consider all the data available. We are only getting a general impression. We said that from the NT itself a general order of rite can be observed: prayer, the words of institution, the breaking of the bread, and the distribution of bread and wine to the congregation, and then the communion itself. We saw from Justin Martyr and Cyril of Jerusalem that in the early centuries it appears that the congregation received the bread and wine at the front of the church from the hands of the minister and his assistants.

We will not pay much attention to the medieval period. There were important developments in this period, of course, and some of them that bore mightily on the Lord's Supper, or "mass" as it came to be called. Some of those changes were: that the mass continued to be celebrated in Latin even when the people did not know the language; that the cup was withdrawn from the laity (in part for fear of spilling the blood of Christ); that the clergyman officiating did so with his back to the people; that the mass came more and more to be celebrated without the Christian congregation present at all; and an increasingly infrequent participation on the part of the people. This last change was hurried along, interestingly, not by any decision or teaching of the church. Indeed, throughout the period the church made any number of efforts to try to get people to participate in the mass more frequently. But they resisted all efforts until a Synod decreed that one must take the communion at least once per year.

The reason for the reticence of people to come to the Lord's Table is instructive. The Church thought they should come, urged them to come, but they didn't and wouldn't. Fact is, they were smart enough to realize that everything about the way the Lord's Supper was conducted suggested not its blessing but its danger. This development began in early Christianity and continued its development through the Middle Ages. An overemphasis on and misunderstanding of Paul's warnings in 1 Corinthians 11 – "watch out or the Lord's Supper will kill you" – together with gathering superstitions concerning the Mass,

"led to an over-emphasis on the achieved high state of sanctity required of the Christian communicant rather than the earnestness of his desire to achieve it, and 'the food of men wayfaring' came to be looked upon rather as the reward of the saints, so far as the laity were concerned." [Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, 595]

And no wonder, given the superstitions. According to Thomas Aquinas [*Summa Theologica* III, qu. 83, 6, p. 584, col. 1]:

If a fly or a spider should be found in the cup before consecration, or even poison found mixed in it, it should be poured out, and, the cup being washed, some other wine be put

again *in the cup*. But, if some of these *same things* should be found after consecration, the *insect* ought cautiously to be seized, and diligently washed, and burned, and the water, together with the ashes, be thrown into the sacrary [shrine]. But if poison should be found in the consecrated wine, in no way ought the priest to give it to anyone lest the cup of life be turned into the cup of death; but he ought to pour out the contents and keep the liquid in a vessel among the relics.

Clearly we have come a long way from the simplicity of the New Testament. We have entered a world of magic and sorcery, of sacred objects and of occult curses. Transubstantiation turns the bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ, extremely potent elements now that can do great harm as well as good. Faith and its necessity was not entirely forgotten, but almost so and a superstitious conception of the Lord's Supper was widespread. Indeed, according to Thomas Aquinas, the benefit of the Eucharist came not from its use by faithful people, but from the consecration of the elements by the priest. [III, q. 80, 12, p. 557 col. 2] That is why it didn't matter to him if the people only ate the bread and did not drink the wine – as was by then common in the practice of the Eucharist in the church. Thomas justified the practice of communion in only one kind, as it is called, as a way to avoid the inadvertent spilling of the blood of Christ. [III, q. 80, 12] No wonder it provoked more fear than joy. The simplicity of the early Christian Lord's Supper as a memorial meal and occasion of immediate communion between the Lord and his people seems far removed from all of this and so does the delight and expectation with which worshippers came to the Supper in the early church. And, of course, along with all of this came so much else: the notion that Christ's sacrifice was actually repeated in the Eucharist, the selling of masses, Eucharists being performed with no people present, and the practice of kneeling to adore the host at the moment of consecration which was signaled by the ringing of a bell. In case a crumb of the bread or a drop of the wine fell upon the cloth or the priest's garments, the part was to be cut out and burnt and the ashes thrown into the sacrary. And if the...linen cover prescribed for the altar, should be wet in the blood, it was to be washed out three times and the water drunk by a priest. If a drop happened to fall on a stone or a piece of wood or hard earth, the priest or some pious person was to lick it up. [Schaff, v, 723] Believe me, I could go on and on.

It is very interesting to me that the great liturgical scholar, Dom Gregory Dix, argues, and I think with some justice, that while the Reformation repaired the theological errors that had come to surround the theory of the Eucharist – transubstantiation and the like –, it left very much in tact the popular piety of the sacrament, and especially the notion of its fearsome potential. As the sacrament came to be celebrated by the people much less frequently, the awe in which it was held increased, and the emphasis shifted from the eating and drinking of the people to the "individual's subjective feelings" and his or her worthiness to partake of the sacred rite. As the Eucharist became more removed and remote from the people, it became "a mere occasion for or accompaniment to the individual's subjective devotion and thoughts." [Dix, 600] What the Reformation did, Dix argues, was to "take the medieval piety associated with the Eucharist and transfer it to a new theory of the Lord's Supper." And so, in Reformed churches it was quite natural for the Lord's Supper to become an infrequent addition to normal or regular worship, just another means by which to stir up devotional and especially penitential feelings. [602]

And you know that, in a striking way, the Protestant world has reproduced some of the subjective conditions that were characteristic of the Medieval Church. People communicated less frequently, there was a great fear of the sacrament as emphasis fell upon a person's worthiness to partake of such sacred mysteries, and a great cleavage was introduced between the ordinary worship of the Christian Sunday and the Lord's Supper. In some Scottish and Dutch churches following the Reformation there would be a handful of members and hundreds of adherents, believing people who attended church every Sunday but who had never taken the Lord's Supper for fear of it. The practice of infrequent communion, though it was never taught this way, couldn't help but create in the minds of people that the Supper worked in some almost physical way and gave you something that lasted for three months or six and then wore off and had to be renewed. Why else would you worship God and hear his Word every Sunday but have the sacrament only twice or four times or twelve times a year? The emphasis on fencing the table in Reformed churches, excluding those who were not true believers in Christ from participation in the Supper, served to lay further stress on the importance of staying away rather than drawing near.

Here is an interesting confirmation of an important point. The way in which the Lord's Supper is practiced, the way people encounter it in the life of the church, often has more to do with how they understand it and with what attitude they come to it than the theology of the Lord's Supper that is held by their church or the teaching about the Supper that they receive. This is what we want to inquire concerning our traditional practice here. How has it shaped the way in which we think about the Lord's Supper, what it means, what we are to receive from it, what its place in worship and life actually is?

I have told you before the famous anecdote concerning the eccentric but brilliant Scottish OT professor, "Rabbi" Duncan. He was administering the Lord's Supper one Sunday in church and noticed a woman quietly sobbing near the front of the church. She let both the bread and the wine pass by her without taking any. He got up, got some bread and wine from an elder, took it to the woman and handed it to her. "Take it, woman; it's *for* sinners." That was right, but a very large number of Christians still have the view that the Supper is not to be taken if you are in some significant way aware of recent sin in your life, if you have not surmounted your sins. Infrequent communion, warnings that accompany the Lord's Supper in our fencing of the Table, etc. send a signal that this is how people ought to think of the Supper in the first place; it is something not to be trifled with.

There was, however, quite a variety of practice, among the Reformation churches. Take, for example, this account of a Moravian Lord's Supper from before the Reformation. The Moravians were a pre-Reformation Protestant community founded in 1457 in Bohemia. They celebrated the Lord's Supper infrequently.

"After some three weeks of preparatory services and both private and public confession, the rite opens with a hymn, a prayer, and a sermon. During a further hymn, the priest and deacons...approach the Table, which is already prepared. The people are exhorted to penitence, then kneel for prayer, [the Lord's Prayer], and a hymn. They rise for the absolution. The Institution Narrative is chanted to consecrate the elements. After priest and deacons have received, the people approach at the priest's invitation, in their several

groups (by social and church rank, by sex and age). At first, they communicated standing, but pressure from other Churches led to a kneeling posture. During the communion, hymns on the passion were sung. Thanksgivings, intercessions, and a blessing completed the service.” [D.H. Tripp, “Protestantism and the Eucharist,” *The Study of Liturgy*, 296]

It was the famous Reformer Ulrich Zwingli who introduced what we know today as the practice of pew communion, communion while the congregation sits in its seats. It was done in silence at first, but this was eventually thought too oppressive and thereafter John 13ff. was read during the communion. This service lasted only a generation and then died out, but was revived in the Puritan period in England. It is interesting that this is the origin of our particular way of “doing” the Lord’s Supper.

At Calvin’s Geneva, while Calvin fought for every Sunday communion, he managed to wrest only four per year from the city fathers. The people came forward to receive the bread and wine as they had always done, “with reverence in good order and Christian modestie” as one contemporary described it. During the delivery of the elements and the communion itself either a psalm was sung or Scripture was read.” [W.D. Maxwell, *The Liturgical Portions of the Genevan Service Book*, 51] The Scottish scholar W.D. Maxwell comments on the practice of silence during the communion. “To have silence during the act of Communion is a custom unknown to the old Catholic and Reformed rites; silence at this point is entirely a modern innovation... Calvin, in his *Form of Prayers*, writes concerning the time of the delivery of the elements and the communion of the congregation itself, “Meanwhile, one chants some Psalm or one reads something from the Scripture relevant to that which is signified by the sacrament.” [139]

In Frankfort, where many British exiles from Bloody Mary awaited the day when they might return to England and Scotland, “the people came in order to the table with great reverence, the men first, then the women, and each receives a small piece of bread from the pastor.” Miles Coverdale, the great Bible translator, adds the note that each communicant received the bread from one minister at one end of the Table and the wine from another minister at the other end. [138]

Now, I’m going to stop at this point. We will finish up next time with the Scottish, the Puritan, and the American practice of the Lord’s Supper and then apply the whole to our situation. But, before we conclude tonight, I want to say just a word about the point I have made several times tonight about the Supper being a matter so solemn and so sacred as to raise as much the specter of alarm as delight and desire in the believing heart.

After all, some of you may well be saying to yourselves, “But, isn’t that right?” Isn’t that precisely what Paul says about the Supper in 1 Cor. 11: viz. that if you don’t practice it aright you will bring down divine judgment upon yourself? Weren’t there those in that Corinthian church who had fallen asleep – that is, who had died! – because they had taken the body and the blood of the Lord unworthily?

Well, yes, of course, that is what Paul said. But, the mistake that has been far too widely made, is to apply Paul's words to ordinary believers struggling with their sins. Paul is talking about people who were living in open defiance of the Lordship of Christ, who were betraying him with the spiritual and moral indifference of their lives.

The fact is, what Paul says in 1 Cor. 11 is nothing else but what Isaiah said in Isa. 1 (or Amos in his chapter 5; or Jeremiah in his chapter 7). Don't imagine that God will be pleased with you for giving him your worship, if you have no intention, real intention, of honoring him with your life.

Look with me at Isa. 1:10-20. [Read]

Now, take note of what the Lord says through Isaiah the prophet.

1. Worship offered without the loyalty of the heart and life offends the Lord. He speaks of sacrifices in v. 11, offerings in v. 13, assemblies and feasts, *even prayer in v. 15*. Why? Because of the injustice and the disobedience of their lives (vv. 15-17). And, if they persist in this betrayal of the covenant, there will be hell to pay (v. 20). *That is precisely Paul's message in 1 Cor. 11.*
2. Neither Isaiah nor Paul is talking about real believers who are conscious of their shortcomings and grieving that they are not holier than they are. They are not speaking of Christians who are fully aware that in past days they have not lived up to their calling. They are speaking about people who are giving only lip service to the gospel and to God. There is a great difference between those two groups of people and the failure to distinguish properly between them has bedeviled the view of the Lord's Supper in many Protestant communities. In some cases people don't even come to the Supper (Highland Scottish adherents or Dutch Reformed pietist adherents), in other cases they take the Supper on a case by case basis, depending on how well they think they are living the Christian life at the time. If they are conscious that they have been sinful in a particular way of late, they feel that they should not take the Supper. But this is turning the Gospel on its head. As Rabbi Duncan rightly told the woman, "its *for* sinners." You wouldn't, I hope, think that you shouldn't come to the Lord, to talk to him, to get near to him, if you felt yourself a great sinner. That would be the reason to get as near to him as you could! The Gospel is not a matter of making yourself worthy enough to partake of Christ's benefits, it is a matter of sinful people depending upon the Lord's grace and seeking it in their need in every way in which he has promised to give it to us.
3. The early church, so far as we can tell, never made "fencing the table" a liturgical act. That is, they didn't have a form of words that the minister said as part of the Lord's Supper ritual that warned the impenitent from participating and urged upon the faithful a proper solemnity and self-examination. The fencing that was done was really a form of church discipline, discipline in the positive sense. The Eucharist was the second half of the Sunday service and it was widely the practice of the early church to include in that part of the service only baptized church members. So, if you were a seeker but not yet a confirmed Christian, if you were a convert but had not yet been baptized, you had to leave the service after the preaching of the Word, the doors were closed behind you, and only the faithful participated in the sacrament. This was known as the *disciplina arcana*, the "secret discipline." Of course, in such a circumstance there was no need to warn the impenitent from participating in the

Supper because they weren't there. If there were impenitent, they would be revealed by the disobedience of their lives, would fall under church discipline in the negative sense, and, under discipline, they would have to leave the church with the unbaptized attenders.

4. When the distinction between the world and the church was blurred after the official recognition of Christianity in the 4th century and when multitudes of nominal Christians were added to the ranks, the secret discipline became impossible and, in truth, meaningless, for there were great numbers of baptized people who weren't living a Christian life but were coming to worship.
5. The Protestant Church cared afresh about the necessity of actually living the Christian life if one wished to be known as a Christian, but it did not re-institute the secret discipline. Instead all the emphasis fell on a fencing of the table that occurred in the church service, before the Lord's Supper itself. The problem was that when you make a great point of talking solemnly about the Lord's Supper with a view to the unbeliever, it is very hard not to change the way in which the believer thinks about communion. He or she hears the fencing message as well, the warning; they too feel the seriousness of a right participation, and the worry. Indeed, it is only the sensitive, earnest Christian who pays attention to the fencing and takes it to heart. And, if you add that fencing practice to an infrequent Lord's Supper, it heightens the whole thing all the more.
6. Another interesting and important observation is that in Isaiah it is not the sacrificial meal alone that is corrupted and betrayed by a merely nominal faith, a faith that is in name only and not in life and obedience. Prayer, for example, is also corrupted and made offensive to God and so are offerings.
7. But, because of 1 Cor. 11 all the emphasis on fencing in the Protestant Church fell on the Lord's Supper. Why is this? Why don't we warn the impenitent at the very beginning of the service that just as they ought not to participate in the Lord's Supper if they are not earnest Christians, neither should they participate in any other part of our worship. An unbeliever sings judgment to himself when he sings hymns to God he does not mean and which do not really express the convictions of his heart. She prays judgment to herself when she bows her head or when she joins in a confession of sin that she does not mean and which does not express any real commitment or intention to live in obedience to God. They give offerings and bring judgment upon themselves if they think that somehow they are doing good by putting money in an offering plate when, in truth, they have no intention of offering themselves to God. There isn't a part of a rightly ordered worship service that can be participated in by an unbeliever without hypocrisy that is offensive to God. So, why is it that we fence only the Lord's Table? What is it about the sacrament that requires all of this care to keep out the unbeliever when we make no effort to keep him from doing any number of other religious acts that also must displease God. This is a great inconsistency that has long lain unmentioned and uncorrected in Protestant worship. In Jesus' day, of course, you couldn't even get into the temple unless you were a Jew in good standing. So the worship of the tabernacle and temple of the OT. And, largely, so the worship of early Christianity. If we are not to return to that model, and it would seem remarkably difficult to do that, then what are we to do? Our fathers in the faith were not overly troubled by unbelievers singing and praying with us in worship but made a great deal of them not participating in the Lord's Supper. Can we justify that distinction from the Bible. It would seem very difficult to do so. The Bible includes all hypocrisy in worship as sinful and does not distinguish between one act of worship and another. We must think carefully about this.

But, in the meantime, let us all reflect on the fact, the unmistakable fact, that it is surely a mistake, a mistake of significant proportion, to apply 1 Cor. 11 and Paul's warning about eating and drinking judgment to oneself as if Paul were speaking about Christians in the ordinary frailty of their lives. He is speaking clearly about people who could not continue to be regarded as Christians if they did not repent of their way of life.

By the testimony of the Bible and early Christianity, it is a normal, ordinary, and wonderful thing, every Lord's Day to come to the table of the Lord and partake of his body and blood. To seal our entire worship with this sign and seal of his death for us and of the great feast to which we pilgrim's are slowly making our way. You eat every day because you need food to live. You eat this food every Lord's Day because you need this food to walk worthy of the grace you have received.