

The Lord's Supper at Faith Presbyterian Church No. 11
Conclusion
May 6, 2001

As I mentioned to you last time, tonight I want to report to you the decisions that have been made by your ministers and elders regarding changes in our practice of the Lord's Supper here at Faith Presbyterian Church. But, before I do, I want briefly to remind you what we have so far considered in our examination of the practice of the Lord's Supper in the history of Christianity.

We began, as you remember, with the question of the elements themselves which, interestingly, was controversial largely in regard to the bread in earlier ages but which, more recently, has been controversial in the matter of what is to be drunk as the symbol of Christ's blood. We considered the arguments that have been advanced for several generations now against the use of wine, generally against the use of wine at all and so, by extension, its use in the Lord's Supper. We found those arguments a case of special pleading at best and argued that not only was wine the drink that Jesus actually specified for use in the Lord's Supper but that wine figured in the biblical feasts precisely because of its special qualities. Wine was the choice drink of the Ancient Near Eastern world. It is probably not too much to say it is the choice drink of at least large parts of the world still today. It is a drink that is particularly associated with feasting and with pleasure. In the Bible wine and the abundance of wine are often images of the Messiah's kingdom precisely because wine is the most delightful of drinks and creates the most pleasing effects. As the Scripture says, it makes glad the heart of a man. We said that wine, as an element in the Lord's Supper, was not so much a symbol of nourishment as bread was. It was a symbol of feasting, of joy, of God's blessing. Grape juice, on the other hand, cannot carry the impressive symbolism of wine in the Lord's Supper. We pointed out that until the temperance movement of the mid-19th century, the Christian church always drank wine in the Lord's Supper and, still today, the vast majority of Christians in the world still drink wine in the Lord's Supper.

The question in regard to the bread of the Lord's Supper is whether it ought to be leavened bread or unleavened, as, presumably, was the bread that the Lord used to institute the Lord's Supper, doing that, as he did, as part of a Passover Meal. We argued that, while unleavened bread had a symbolic significance in the Passover Meal, we would not know what significance unleavened bread should have in the Lord's Supper. No such significance is proposed in any case. But, what is even more important, in the OT rituals that used *unleavened* bread the fact that the bread was unleavened was always explicitly stated. But, we are never told in the NT that unleavened bread was the bread of the Lord's Supper or was supposed to be. The Lord's Supper was instituted on the occasion of a Passover meal, a meal that used unleavened bread as it used lamb and other things, but the Lord's Supper was not itself a Passover meal. There are many features of the Passover that do not carry over into the Lord's Supper. The Lord took bread, we are told. We assume it was the bread that was there for the Passover meal, which would have been unleavened though that is nowhere precisely said. We are not told that he took *unleavened* bread or that there was any more significance to the bread that he took than that it was bread. This explains what seems to have been the virtually universal practice of using leavened bread in the early Christian Lord's Supper and the use of ordinary bread in our Reformed tradition from Calvin onward. Bread is used because it is the staple of life and because it is the perfect symbol of the nourishment of life. [As an aside, we noted that the medieval church argued that it was

acceptable to communicate in one kind only – the bread and not the wine – because Christ was wholly present in either of the consecrated elements. However, it does seem from the biblical materials that the symbolism of the bread and of the wine is not the same and that something precious and important and necessary is lost if either the bread or the wine is not consumed. The Lord’s Supper is nourishment and feasting and bread suggests more the former and wine the latter.]

Following our consideration of the elements to be used in the Lord’s Supper, we considered the various ways in which the Supper has been practiced through the ages. We considered the various ways in which the congregation was situated about the table and the elements served to those who communicated. As a general rule, the congregation came forward to the table in early Christianity, as they did in Calvin’s Geneva. They sat around enormous tables in Scotland until the 19th century. And, from the Puritan period onward, the Reformed have, by and large, taken the bread and wine in their seats. A factor bearing mightily on the choice of a method of distribution, a factor often unrecognized I suspect, was how often the Lord’s Supper was served. A practice that was cumbersome and took a long time was no impediment if the Lord’s Supper was observed rarely, as for example in Presbyterian Scotland from the 16th to the 19th centuries. Every Sunday communion, on the other hand, favored simpler, less time-consuming forms of distribution.

That is a very short summary of the ten lectures we have so far devoted to the subject of the practice of the Lord’s Supper. Now to our conclusions.

I. First, we are going to add wine to our communion elements.

I say “add” wine, because we will continue to offer grape juice for those who prefer it. We realize that generations have come and gone since grape juice became the accepted substitute for wine in the Protestant evangelical Lord’s Supper. It is a deeply engrained practice and there are many who not only prefer grape juice to wine, but are convinced that wine ought not to be used. There are such people in this congregation and in other congregations of our own Presbyterian Church in America and other evangelical churches. We know that. We do not think it right to expect that everyone will come to our convictions as quickly as we have. And we do not want to put an obstacle in the way of any Christian’s sincere and happy participation in the Lord’s Supper here. Nor are we a congregation in isolation. We are part of the world of evangelical Protestantism and we are fully aware of the difference of conviction on this point that can be found throughout that world. We want our Supper to be accessible to all.

We will distinguish the cups that contain wine from those that contain grape juice and you will have your choice. It may take us a little time to learn what proportion of each to supply, but we will get that right soon enough.

We are not of a mind to try the common cup. Whatever we may think of the rightness of that practice, we felt it is simply impracticable. Too many people would be deterred from participation.

II. Second, we will continue our use of leavened or ordinary bread, but we will no longer cut squares of bread ahead of time to be distributed. The congregation will take from the same loaf that was broken during the words of institution.

We are anxious to attempt, so far as this is possible, to connect the actual elements consumed in the communion to those broken and poured at the table during the recitation of the Lord's words of institution. We admit that this cannot be done with the wine. A common cup is not possible. Further, to have two elements to be drunk makes that impossible for another reason. Obviously we will not pour both a cup of wine and a cup of grape juice while the words of institution are being recited. But, we can use the same loaf we break at the table for the distribution of the bread and will do so.

III. Third, we are going to make communion at the front of the sanctuary our *primary* mode of distribution.

Now this needs some further elaboration. I said "primary" because we are going to retain pew communion in our practice, but it will be less frequent, perhaps once a month. Part of the reason for that is one of the same arguments that we will use to justify the change to communion in the front. Just as front communion has the support of Christian antiquity, so pew communion has the support of antiquity in our Presbyterian tradition. We thought it unwise and unnecessary to jettison that tradition entirely. What is more, to use two different practices serves as a witness to our conviction that the method of observing the Lord's Supper is not essential to its meaning or significance. We want everyone to know this. We are not making this change because we believe that pew communion is *wrong*. We do believe there are reasons to *prefer* front communion, but these are hardly sufficient to invalidate pew communion. Indeed, there are some things to be said in favor of pew communion, not least being the fact that the Lord's Supper is a meal and one ordinarily sits to eat a meal.

The primary justification for communion in the front are two considerations that bear directly on the relationship between our practice and our understanding of the meaning and significance of the Supper.

The first of these is that front communion re-establishes the biblical emphasis on the eating the bread and drinking the wine. If there is a grand objection to pew communion it is that it tends to diminish the acts of eating and drinking themselves and replace them with what might be called "aided meditation." As one sits in the pew waiting for the elements and continues to sit after the elements are eaten and drunk one prays and the time taken for prayer greatly exceeds the time taken for eating and drinking. Indeed, in much of evangelical culture it was inevitable that one's communion was judged or measured according to how well the time of private prayer and meditation went. Surely no one wishes to minimize the importance of prayer and meditation, but nothing in Holy Scripture suggests that this is the purpose of the Lord's Supper or the way of its working, that is, primarily as an aid to private meditation. Coming to the front re-establishes the emphasis on the eating and drinking. One comes to eat and drink and that is what he or she does. That is his or her communion.

The second primary argument for front distribution of the elements is that it also revitalizes the focus on the corporate character of the Lord's Supper. It shows us all eating of the same loaf and drinking of the same cup. It makes our Lord's Supper more and more obviously something that unites us, something precious and sacred that we do together. We come together to the loaf and to the cup. Young and old, men and women, we all come to receive the bread and wine. After all, what is undoubtedly and emphatically an important part of this "Supper" is that it is a meal taken together. It was in the first instance and has been ever since. It is a family meal. It is not a private act but a familial one. This precious and important part of the symbolism of the Supper was also attenuated in pew communion which tended to individualize the action of communion. Front communion is more a matter of *doing something together*.

IV. Fourth, we will continue to employ both elders and deacons in the distribution of the elements.

From the very beginning the minister had assistants in the distribution of the elements. Justin Martyr mentions the help of deacons in his *Apology*, written in the middle of the second century. Our pew communion through the years has required a larger number of officers than either office could supply, so, out of practical necessity we have used both elders and deacons to distribute. However, Christian antiquity favors the use of deacons and the Reformed tradition favors the use of elders. Arguments at least rooted in biblical principles can be made for both officers as communion assistants. We decided we would retain the practice of both Christian antiquity and our Reformed tradition and continue to use both elders and deacons to assist the ministers in the distribution of the elements.

You may expect that there will be two lines coming forward and on each side of the front of the sanctuary there will be a minister or church officer with the bread and another with the wine. Additionally there will be officers to replace the elements when they are exhausted.

V. Fifth, we will no longer commune in silence.

We are convinced by the evidence that communion in silence has little to commend it either in Christian history or in theory. Further, it also, as we said of pew communion, tends powerfully to individualize and privatize the communion.

In our present practice we sing a hymn while the bread is being distributed and have silence during the distribution of the wine. There may be some adjustments necessary as we adjust to the new practice but we expect now to sing two hymns as we now do, though we will not wait to the end of the communion to start the singing of the second hymn. Furthermore, we intend to place a Scripture reading of varying length between the two hymns.

So, as the communion begins, a hymn will be sung by the congregation, most of whom will still be in their seats, some of whom will be filling the aisle to walk forward to receive and commune. After the singing of that first hymn an appropriate Scripture text will be read. That will be followed straightaway by the singing of a second hymn, wherever we may be in the communion itself by that time. That second hymn will conclude the service, apart from the benediction, silent prayer, and, usually, a choral anthem, as is already our custom. Obviously, we will adjust

to fit the length of the communion, the early service requiring less time for the actual communion than the second service or the evening service.

One reason we decided to retain pew communion on occasion was precisely that by adding the reading and singing during the distribution and communion itself we could counteract the privatizing tendencies of that form of distribution.

VI. Sixth, and finally, the Supper will be fenced, along with the entire service, with a written text at the head of the bulletin, not by an oral announcement as part of the liturgy of the Supper itself.

It seems clear to us that there is no biblical principle that distinguishes participation in the Lord's Supper from participation in the other acts that make up our liturgy: hymns, prayers, offerings, confessions of faith, etc. Further, there is no biblical precedent for fencing the table as a part of the liturgy of the table itself. That is, there is no biblical precedent for including at the beginning of the Lord's Supper a separate warning about unworthy participation. To place such a warning there cannot help but shape the sense people have of the communion in an unduly negative way. Fencing is rather simply the reminder that only Christians really can participate in Christian worship and so only they should do so. We intend to make that clear with a short statement at the head of the Order of Service and, perhaps, to provide instructions or a model prayer for the use of those who cannot participate in the communion itself. It mistakes many things to put a fencing formula in the middle of a worship service and to distinguish the Supper in principle from all the other acts of Christian worship already undertaken.

Now, you are no doubt wondering when these changes will be instituted. After a lengthy discussion it was agreed that, all things considered, it was wisest to wait until the Autumn. Summer is upon us and we felt it would be more difficult to get off to a good start with the new practices during the summer. What is more, there are a few questions of detail that have not yet been answered. For example, we have not yet chosen the wine to be used. During the summer, on any number of summer Sundays we will have only one minister present, and on two Sundays we will have a guest preacher, and so on. We felt it was wisest to introduce changes as sweeping as these when we were entirely prepared for them. I realize that this may disappoint some of you and strike others as an anti-climax. However, it will also give everyone time to get used to the idea before we actually begin to practice our new Lord's Supper at or around the beginning of September.

Now, I want to conclude all of this by taking us back to the meaning and the significance of the Lord's Supper. And I want to do this by reminding you of four great dimensions of the Supper, four ways in which the Supper is to be a blessing to us. [Cf. E. Kevan, *The Lord's Supper*.]

First, our Savior said of the Lord's Supper he had instituted, "*Do this in remembrance of me.*" The Supper is an act of remembrance on our part, a remembrance of the Lord and all that he did for us to secure our salvation. We take the bread, his body, and drink the wine, his blood, in the active remembrance of that sacrifice by which he secured our eternal life and happiness at such terrible cost to himself.

That blood that flowed for sin,
 In symbol here we see;
 And feel the blessed pledge within,
 That we are loved [by] Thee.

Second, the Supper is a sign and seal of the covenant that God has made with us, and, in that sense, a renewal of that covenant, just as the entire worship service is designed to be. Remember what the Lord said in regard to the wine at the institution of the Supper: “this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” This is the blood of *the covenant* that God has made with us, that relationship he formed with us by his grace and power, drawing us into his family, promising us his blessing and favor and summoning us to live for him. All of this is renewed, we re-engage our hearts and minds and wills with all of this in love and promise when we partake of the Lord’s Supper. We stand afresh in covenant with our God.

My blood I thus pour forth he cries,
 To cleanse the soul in sin that lies;
 In this the covenant is sealed,
 And heaven’s eternal love revealed.

Third, the Supper is an act of *fellowship* with the Lord and with one another. In 1 Cor. 10:16 we read in the NIV, “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a *participation* in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a *participation* in the body of Christ?” That word the NIV renders “participation” is the Greek word *koinonia* or “fellowship.” In Acts 2:42 we are told that the disciples continued in “fellowship.” The same word. In 1 Cor. 1:9 we read that we were “called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” Same word. The great Pauline benediction speaks of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Same word. In 1 John 1:3, John writes, “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” The word means our sharing with others in something, our participation *with* someone in something. In regard to the Supper, Paul tells us in 1 Cor. 10:16 both that we have fellowship with the body and blood of Christ, with Christ himself, but *that we all share this together*. He goes on to say in the next verses, “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.” When we come to receive the bread and wine we both commune with or fellowship with our Savior and with all our brethren who are doing the same as we for the same reasons.

Fourth, the Supper is a pledge, an earnest of things to come. Remember what Paul said, “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death *until he comes*. And he said to his disciples, and forced the matter upon their attention by the arresting way he spoke, that he would not participate in such a meal with his disciples again until he could enjoy the great feast together with them of which the Supper was but a foretaste or pledge.

Feast after feast thus comes and passes by,
 Yet, passing, points to the glad feast above,
 Giving sweet foretaste of the festal joy,
 The Lamb’s great bridal feast of bliss and love.

Just as we look backward at the Supper, so we look forward with anticipation. Every time we come to the Table we cry out together and each in his or her heart, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

And thus that dark betrayal-night
With the last advent we unite,
By one blest chain of loving rite,
Until he come.

One final thought. After his resurrection and before his ascension, the Lord Jesus appeared a number of times to his disciples at meals. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus recognized him only when he prayed and broke bread before them. Other meals are mentioned. Without a doubt the disciples then connected their experience of eating with the risen Christ with their continued participation in the Lord's Supper. He was present with them, but now by the Holy Spirit. He continued to be the host that he had been at the first Lord's Supper, but now his presence was known only by faith. He had told them that he would be with them always, the meal was named "the Lord's Supper" by the apostles themselves, he had hosted the first such supper, and, in general, what he had done for and with his disciples while among them in the flesh, he promised to continue to do among them by the Spirit.

So, every Lord's Day, we re-center ourselves and our lives in this great remembrance of Christ's love and sacrifice for us, the renewal of the covenant God has made with us, the refreshment of our fellowship with Christ and with one another through Christ, and in anticipation of what will soon be ours. And all of this from the Lord's own hand by his Holy Spirit, feeding us up for the life of faith and our pilgrimage to heaven. Thus the Supper is the capstone of all our worship, summing up all our praise, prayer, and promise and directing our hearts once again upward to Christ and across to one another. A Lord's Supper rightly taken is the stuff of our life as Christians and the nourishment we need to walk by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us.

That it may be all of these things more and more for us all, and have its perfect work in us by Christ's blessing, we propose these changes and invite your prayerful anticipation of them. God bless us all!