



Bicentennial of the Brush Run Church
1811-2011



Pastoral Reflections on Communion



By Don Brewer

To partake of the bread and wine is certainly a moment to draw close to the Creative Spirit in more than a passing symbolic manner. Wisdom still surrounds us. We have the opportunity to draw closer.

The Minister called me into his study after a few weeks of my first fulltime job, Minister of Education in a downtown Church in Nashville. He observed that my “call to communion was not appropriate. It was barely related to the Lord’s Supper and seemed off the top of my head.” He suggested I use words similar to the following:

“Come to this sacred table, not because you must, but because you may; come not to testify that you are righteous, but that you sincerely love the Lord Jesus Christ and desire to be his true disciples; come not because you are strong but because you are weak; not because you have any claim on the grace of Christ but because of your frailty and sin you stand in constant need of his mercy and help; come not to express an opinion, but to seek his presence and pray for his Spirit.”

I discovered many years later that these were words used by some denominations in their Call to Communion. Since that conversation, I have sought to avoid triviality in my introduction to the Lord’s Supper. I would not claim to have succeeded. But that was my only instruction about the Lord’s Supper from another Disciple Minister or teacher which I can recall in all my years as a ministerial student or as a Pastor. That still surprises me. And that one came as a kind and necessary rebuke. A Jewish Rabbi did give me a book on the Seder

(Passover celebration.) That was very instructive to me of Jesus' last meal before His arrest and has been used in some Holy Weeks for an early church-like Agape¹ feast.

In five student assignments thru four years, five fulltime ministries over thirty-eight years, four interim pastorates of less than one year each, and innumerable fill-in Sundays in ten states, I have been oriented to the local worship order, including Communion, by Elders of the Christian Church.

The "Lord's Supper" or "Communion" celebrated weekly among all three branches of this early 19th century "Restoration Movement" is a living tradition among Elders, Deacons and Members of local congregations. My grandchildren, who are fifth generation Disciples, consider this practice the norm. In 1976, while the youth of a Raleigh, North Carolina congregation presented a stirring worship musical, "Godspell," a white-haired Elder prayed during Communion: "Bless these youth, in whose veins flows the blood of remembrance." His phrase burned itself into my memory and summarizes for many the Disciple experience of the Lord's Supper. The Communion lives by being remembered through generations.

HOW IT BEGAN

In May of 1811, two centuries ago, a former Presbyterian Minister, Thomas Campbell, whose passion was the reunion of the Church and his son, Alexander, (a student of the Bible, Theology, the Enlightenment, and Reformation)² were instrumental in starting a new congregation. The Brush Run Disciples Church, near Washington, Pennsylvania, would begin a practice of weekly communion which was almost unknown among Protestant bodies of that time. Worshipers at Brush Run were encouraged to "examine themselves", not a widely practiced approach to determine communion eligibility. The young man, Alexander Campbell, would become the dominant voice and writer of a new religious movement on the American frontier dedicated to a strict adherence to the New Testament and its requirements for Church practices. A spirit of liberty abroad in the newly established nation would be fertile soil for an individual, congregational, and periodical magazine approach to Bible study.

Many Protestant groups had reacted so strongly to what they interpreted as "magic" in and an overemphasis on the Mass in Roman Catholic worship that they abandoned the practice of communion except at special times of the year. The early followers of the Campbells revived the weekly practice because they were convinced that early Christians had practiced it each Lord's Day.

¹ The Greek word in the New Testament translated as 'Love'. Jude vs. 12 refers to the Love Feast.

² Like many of America's founding fathers, Campbell was quite familiar with the writings of empiricist John Locke.

Alexander Campbell did not call Baptism or Communion “Sacraments”. He insisted on the biblical word “ordinance”, a form of “ordain”. He taught that there are other ordinances besides Baptism and the Lord’s Supper commanded by Jesus: namely, preaching, fasting, prayer and the confession of sins. Campbell saw these, too, as means of grace. It could be argued that Preaching had become for many Protestant bodies more of an ongoing channel of grace than any other activity with the possible exception of prayer. Indeed, in the last few decades, the Roman Catholic Church has instituted an emphasis upon the sermon as an important part of worship, though not calling it a sacrament.

THE ELDER AT THE TABLE

Despite my assertion that Elders have passed along the Communion tradition, I was surprised in my third student pastorate to learn that none of the Elders or Deacons prayed the prayers of Thanksgiving at the Lord’s Table. They had preaching from the Disciple college every Sunday so the student Minister was asked to do all the praying. I called a meeting after my second Sunday and observed that most of them probably said prayers at home before a meal and therefore could give the Table Thanksgiving on Sundays. They agreed. On the next Sunday, the Custodian of the local school and a former Mayor of the little town asked blessings for the bread and cup. This combination pleased me greatly.

The only parallel in my ministry was six years later when I found myself between two Elders, neither of whom believed that laity should offer the Prayers of Thanksgiving. So I gave the prayers of blessing once more. One of the Elders was a former Governor of the state. The other had been President of the American Medical Association. They were not reticent or lacking in ability. They simply believed with most denominations that only an ordained minister should give the prayers of thanksgiving. The situation never arose again for me in my entire ministry.

In some Disciple churches an Elder presides at the table, a practice perhaps carried over from periods when no minister was present. Neither ordination nor licensing are requirements for administering the bread and cup.

Female Clergy and Elders are no longer a novelty when Disciples gather at the Table. This has come about during my years of ministry, but not commonly until the mid-1970’s. Even my wife was resistant at first. Her reasons were not theological, but pragmatic. She observed that service at the Table was something men would do, “unless given the opportunity to delegate it to the women.” Today, having served as an Elder in two congregations, she considers this the highest and most meaningful form of ministry which she has been privileged to perform in the church. This is a significant conclusion as she has been an outstanding teacher of children, youth and adults.

OPEN COMMUNION

Disciple history tells us that exclusiveness at the Communion Table was the tipping point which spurred the Campbells to a radical break with their early life Church ties, the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, Ireland and then in Pennsylvania. They also had a brief association with Baptists because of a growing conviction for immersion in baptism.

In 1944, I visited some cousins in Brunswick, Georgia. We attended a local Baptist congregation for Sunday Worship. Communion happened to be served on that day. To my surprise, the minister made it clear that only members of the congregation should take the bread and cup as they were passed. I had attended a Disciple Church for seven years and had never heard this announcement. As a newly baptized member of the Christian Church in Waycross, I had begun receiving the communion and being excluded felt very strange. Since my cousins were just regular visitors, they did not think to partake either. It was my first, but not last experience of close communion. It was many years before I learned that only members of the local congregation commune in many Baptist congregations. Even an officer of the Georgia Baptist Convention might have been excluded.

During the 1962 Freedom Rider demonstrations in Albany, Georgia, many white congregations were alarmed that blacks would seek to enter on Sunday morning and worship with them “in an unworthy (i.e. political) manner.” A blue collar Elder of the Christian Church said vehemently, “NO ONE should be barred from the Lord’s Table.”

The Disciple practice of inviting all believers to partake of communion is yet common only among a few denominations. The openness of the Table is usually apparent in Disciple congregations, either printed in the worship bulletin or spoken in the call to communion. The congregation of which we are a part now often quotes its organizing pastor’s statement that “We only exclude those whom Jesus would exclude.” The inference is “no one.”

WEEKLY COMMUNION

The Disciple practice of weekly communion is still a rarity among most Protestant bodies. During my last full-time pastorate I handed a pastor friend the draft of a publicity leaflet we intended to print at the Disciple congregation in Cleveland, Tennessee. Listed among the attributes of the congregation was “Weekly Observance of the Lord’s Supper.” He surprised me by saying, “That would not appeal to me!” He was undoubtedly correct. Most strangers to Disciples in Tennessee would have experienced the Communion as a more seldom observance. His denomination, while purposefully sharing communion with all other Christians, did not think that a weekly observance was desirable, believing it made the Lord’s Supper too common to be special.

Another close acquaintance in a very old Protestant denomination explained that her congregation observed the Eucharist about twice a month. She said they would probably commune weekly, but that it was a lot of trouble to prepare and clean up the individual silver cups which they use.

The congregation we are now a part of is made up of a large percentage of members who have come from other denominational traditions. When the question is asked as to what these members value about Cherry Log, “weekly communion” is invariably a part of the answer.

One Sunday morning in Shelbyville, Tennessee, I trudged through eight inches of snow in ten degree air to a church with a normal attendance over 150, quite certain that I would be alone that day. To my surprise, thirteen of us gathered around the Table to share the bread and the cup. This solidified my own resolve that, no matter what the weather or other circumstance, someone could get to the church. And so the Table would be ready each Lord’s Day, whether presided over by a Pastor, an Elder, a Deacon or lay member.

PREPARING THE BREAD AND CUP

Warm memories surface in recalling the faithful witness of those who have prepared the Table in congregations I have known. At my home church, and in many others, once the bread and cups were ready, they were brought to the Table and covered with a perfectly pressed white linen cloth. It was removed by the Elders as a part of the ceremonial observance when the deacons had assembled at the table. In one church an elderly woman filled the cups week after week. She then took a paring knife and carefully removed every tiny bubble which might be on the grape juice. In still another, the church organist volunteered for communion preparation for decades. She was very pleased when a Sacristy was placed near the remodeled sanctuary. In another, in what may have been a rare custom, the men prepared the elements in the kitchen of the church. They then carried the multiple trays carefully up two landings of steps on the circuitous route to the sanctuary. In each instance in our experience, preparing the Communion has been a ministry rather than a task.

THE PRACTICE OF COMMUNION

Christian Churches vary in the way the Lord’s Supper is practiced. In many, the bread and cup are taken as the trays are passed. My observation has been that most congregations take the bread in unison and then the cup, also simultaneously. In recent years the practice of intinction (dipping bread into a common cup) has increased for special occasions. Regardless of the exact procedure used in partaking, the Scriptural Words of Institution³ are usually said by the presider. One Georgia congregation prints the words for worshippers to repeat

³ 1 Corinthians 11:23-25, Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:14-20.

responsively with the leader. Those gathered soon learn the words and speak them from memory.

For me, 1 Corinthians 11 has provided the Words of Institution in the observance of the Lord's Supper. Paul's words, "For I received of the Lord, what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread...", serves as a natural beginning for the Communion .

Luke's placing a cup first in his narrative seems confusing. But it gained meaning as I led Seder meals for some congregations. This Jewish celebration of Passover uses several cups and blessings throughout the evening. Such a meal illustrates the early church practice of eating a meal together as a celebration of the Last Supper.

Even though the Disciple and Christian Church founders strongly insisted that practices of their reformed churches should adhere to the New Testament, they bequeathed to the movement two non-Biblical words from Reform Church doctrine (Calvin and Zwingli) which appear in the meditations and prayers at a majority of the observances of the Supper. These words are "symbol" and "emblem."

Though I appreciate Ulrich Zwingli's and John Calvin's desires to lessen the grip that the Roman interpretation of the Mass had on Christians, their reduction of the bread and cup to "symbols" or "emblems" has sometimes led to a reduced meaning for the communion. A "kiss" could be called a symbol of love. But it is, in fact, an expression of love which creates more love and enhances a relationship. Likewise, the bread and cup connect us to Christ in a unique manner. Partaking of the elements is an embrace of the living Christ.

AN UNSHARED MEAL

Because of differing theologies which arose in various Protestant reactions to the Roman Catholic interpretation of the Lord's Supper, ("Transubstantiation" will be discussed later) the willingness of many Protestant Christians to approach communion together was fractured for several centuries and is not totally resolved to this day.

Paul's admonition to the Corinthians⁴ is the stated reason the Roman Church, other older Churches, and some protestant denominations deny non-members communion and sometimes advise their members to refrain from receiving communion in other churches.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:27 "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord..& 11:29 "Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. ",

Large portions of the Church feel that a proper understanding or belief about the bread and cup is necessary to participate in the Lord's Supper from their altar.

The irony is that Paul was most concerned that the Corinthian Church was dividing itself into social classes during its gatherings. The wealthier members were arriving early, eating their food with the host and not sharing the supper with poorer late arrivals and slaves. This division was the subject of Paul's ire, not their beliefs about the communion sections of the meal. Our divisions since have added theological and organizational dimensions to his words.

The result is that problems in Corinth have blessed and cursed the Church for centuries. Richard Hays observed that this scandalous problem in the congregation caused Paul to tell a story, without which, later readers might have concluded he did not know, for in no other letter does the Apostle hint that he was familiar with the Lord's Supper. That his narrative and comments gave us excuse for division is a harsh judgment upon our religious jealousies. But his foundational thesis in addressing the problem at Corinth is a rich teaching in true Christian fellowship and a huge leap in understanding Communion and life in the early Church.

Indeed, Paul's last supper narrative seems to be the first set down in writing and forms the basic order of most communion ritual. It parallels that of Mark and Matthew. Luke has the cup first. But since the Seder (Passover Meal) has several cups throughout the meal, the difference is not significant. John has no narrative at the last meal of the establishment of the Communion. But the fourth gospel is heavily endowed with sacramental theology.⁵

With Thomas Campbell, I share great regret for a divided Church. Despite all the advances in Church Unity and the meaningful expressions of that oneness in common worship, service and ministerial fellowship, much of the Church does not go to the Communion Table with other Christians. A Lutheran pastor, a friend, said to me, "We believe that inter-church communion should be the last step in union, not a first."

It would be helpful if the laity of all churches better understood the reasons for disagreement, division, and differing ways of celebration at the Table. We ministers have not taught these issues in a positive way.

ROMAN CATHOLIC MASS

Roman Catholics believe in the doctrine called "transubstantiation." This means the substance (basic reality) of bread and wine are changed when the priest repeats Christ's words from the Last Supper: "This is my Body... my blood." At these moments the elements are changed into the heavenly body and blood of Christ, sacrificed anew for the forgiveness of sin.

⁵ e.g John 6:35ff

The explanation of bread and wine becoming Jesus' flesh and blood is rooted by Catholics in Aristotle's physics of the universe. The "substances" of reality are things in and of themselves. Thus bread is a substance which has "accidents" of taste, color, texture, solidity, etc. Bread may have differing ingredients (e.g. wheat or rye flour, salt, eggs, water, etc). These characteristics may change but the substance remains "bread". In the Catholic mass, the bread itself is said to change into the body of Christ while the "accidents" or ingredient characteristics remain the same. As the body is one with flesh and blood, so Christ is equally present in the bread and the wine.

The Roman Church holds that the Apostles, alone, were given the authority to reenact the moment and power of the Last Supper and to ordain others to do so. Official Church doctrine is that the Bishop of Rome is the true successor and guardian of Apostolic Succession.

The word *Mass* grew out of a popular use of the dis"missal" at the end of worship as a name for the whole service. We still call for a prayer of dismissal at the close of church meetings. Going to Mass is like going to a Benediction! Nice thought!

We have attended only one Mass through all the years where the priest invited all "believers" to receive the communion. This was at a family funeral. The invitation was extended to family beforehand and to the congregation when gathered. I was stunned and ecstatic.

REFORMATION COMMUNION

The Reformation leaders rejected transubstantiation, but some (Lutherans and the branches of the Anglican Church, followed by most Methodists) insisted on the "real presence" of Christ in the communion. Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, (Reform and Presbyterian) used the words "symbol" or "emblem". When Zwingli stated at a conference with Martin Luther that bread was only a symbol or emblem of Christ's body, Luther took a knife and carved into the wooden table between them "Hoc est corpus" or "This is my body", Jesus' words as translated into the Latin Bible. Thus Luther dramatically asserted the presence of Christ in the elements, though he argued that the body is present only while the communion is in progress. The Roman Catholic Council of Trent met to clarify and reaffirm the doctrine of transubstantiation within a few years of the Reformation.

It is my feeling that this confrontation of the reformers reflects the struggle of the whole Church with what happens in the Eucharist. (Universal term used for the Communion meaning Thanks). Thus the clause in my mentor's suggested Call to Communion, "Come not to express an opinion, but to seek a presence..." is wise counsel.

Alexander Campbell, along with millions of educated people of our time was schooled in the British school of Empiricism, particularly John Locke, and was thus (unknowingly of course)

in the camp of most pre-Einstein scientists. The world is “physical and experienced by the senses”. What we can sense and count is “physically real”. Thus most westerners still live in a culture which divides the world of the physical from the spiritual. Since we have no sensual evidence that anything exists beyond the physical that can be tested, most conclude that, for this world, only the physical is present to the senses.

It might be noted that empiricism which gains knowledge by concentrating on what can be experienced and counted gradually evolved for many into a very mechanistic view of the universe. Thus all results had causes which, if known, could predict all results. In this view, an unexplainable event can either be considered “divine” in nature or else merely awaits further causes to be uncovered.

With this perspective, the “symbols” of bread and wine merely serve as a memorial to the first century body and blood of Christ which no longer exist in a physical manner. Thus, many reformers through the last few centuries resisted saying that the physical elements embody Christ since he now exists in Spirit, not flesh.

Actually, John Calvin said it better than most. Rather than holding a purely symbolic view, Calvin noted that with the participation of the Holy Spirit, faith was nourished and strengthened by the sacrament. In his words, the Eucharistic rite was "a secret too sublime for my mind to understand or words to express. I experience it rather than understand it."⁶

This sentiment probably expresses Campbell’s and Stone’s view as well as many Disciples, but was not followed up in the ensuing decades. Alexander Campbell, as well as Barton Stone, considered co-founders of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), was concerned about the depths of meaning in the Lord’s Supper. Stone said “I fear the common remark is too true, that very little solemnity and devotion is manifest in the celebration of this ordinance among our brethren.”⁷ Thus, many of our ministers and their schools could have been upbraided along with me across the decades.

Church history and wise interpretation get lost in congregations fixated upon Scripture alone. Thus they may lose depths of interpretation attained by other Christians in understanding Scripture.

⁶ Quoted in “john Calvin” an article in Wikipedia

⁷ Mark G. Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1997) p. 139

A MORE RECENT VIEW

It should be affirmed that our knowledge of reality has changed radically in the last few decades, but popular notions have not caught up with modern science. Christian doctrine should never become entrapped in the science of any age, but since human perception changes with education, science greatly affects a new generation's faith and understanding of Creation. Theologians and preachers must learn to speak the language of the day and recognize the congruities and incongruities of modern knowledge with ancient faith and spiritual insights. "Our knowledge is partial and our prophecy is partial".⁸ We should not defend ancient science with Bible verses, but see the reign of God in the larger world we now only partly understand. Many of us are awed by new discoveries which lead us to new depths of mystic delight.

In the current understanding of reality, what we see, taste and touch is but energy which seems solid but is merely a result of unseen forces. Molecules are mostly empty. The world we "touch" and "drink" is 99.99999999% not there. It is emptier than the solar system. The physical world of yesteryears does not exist. What we cannot see, but do feel, is information flowing freely throughout the "empty seeming" places. Some scientists call this "Information" or even "Wisdom" which has brought what we see as the physical into being and takes it into other forms as well as non-being. The solid world we thought to be Reality is gone. We know more but understand less.

This is "heady" puzzling stuff. But it is actually quite awesome! "The heavens (and tiny quarks) are telling the glory of God... There is no speech, nor are there words;...yet their message goes out all over the world!"⁹ Thus, the Psalmist summed it best.

The implications for Christian doctrine are always to be worked out in prayerful thought, worship, and thoughtful discussion. But the Gospel of John, chapter one, clearly posits the Logos (or Word) as the agent of Creation, and the enlightener of every person. If the Lord's Supper is a communion with this Creative force, then Transubstantiation, Real Presence, and Memorial may have some meeting places for discussion. To partake of the bread and wine is certainly a moment to draw close to the Creative Spirit in more than a passing symbolic manner. Wisdom still surrounds us. We have the opportunity to draw closer.

EPILOGUE

The ancient Church used Greek philosophical language to explain the words of Jesus about his body and blood. This language (e.g. "substance") was enshrined in ancient creeds.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 13:9. This ranks high among the most ignored verses in our Bibles.

⁹ Excerpted from Psalm 19:1-4.

The later Reformers used the emerging insights and the prevailing views of their day. We have newer and mixed views. Somehow we must learn to talk and pray through our differences of understanding. The ancient Church was trying to deal with consuming the life of Christ in a sacred feast. Catholics accept the communion as a re-sacrifice of Christ. Many Reformers wanted to understand it as a “Memorial” feast which bestowed the grace of Christ truly present. The dominant explanation of the Disciples of generations after Campbell was merely remembrance. Today we are all beginning to see that the whole creation is something of a sacrament, to be treated with great care and reverence.

We must renew our biblical understanding and explore together what we do when we gather at the Table of the Lord. It is a time for self-examination and renewal of the Oneness of Christians with Jesus Christ and each other. We must see the Body and Life of Christ in those around us, regardless of their gender, status in society, age, language or location in the world. The Communion of all the Saints can be the intentional prayer and reality of all worshippers. This goes far beyond merely remembering Jesus’ death, the church of our origins, our parents in faith, or friends. We are gathered into a New Creation which is renewed by the Spirit of God.

The Brush Run Church gave us a gift, one they received from other centuries. God has not left any age without witnesses to his will. These faithful folk bequeathed Disciples a practice of weekly communion open to all who wish to be in Christ when two of three or more are gathered. Let us give thanks for them and celebrate our common heritage.

A CALL TO COMMUNION

My eyes swept the little hump of leaves and winter grass. I could have missed the bird in its final repose, but the pattern of brown was so shaped as to be peaceful, orderly, – still suggesting the Wisdom (Logos) which had formed these feathers and noticed them in life as well as death. I started to move it with my foot, but could not desecrate its perfect position. I crossed myself: chin to chest, breast to breast as I often do when upon the highway a possum, rabbit, deer, or dog lays wasted by humans in hurry machines. The cross brings to my mind Jesus’ words, “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father?”¹⁰

We come to the Lord’s Table as the bird wandered over the grass, seeking a bite or a drink to extend life. Did gratitude accompany its last meal? I would guess it so!

Jesus feasted with the twelve in a lingering moment of joy mixed with sorrow. The bread and wine remained his life among them. Some sensed his resurrected presence in the

¹⁰ Matthew 10:29 KJV.

breaking of bread with a stranger. Can any be refused who want to receive him? How do we tell the Christ, the Living Word, who, among these persons gathered today, is worthy to take the bread and cup? We are privileged to offer to all – this meal of grace and love in Christ’s presence.

The Life of Jesus is yours to have and hold within you this day. The Table is ready!
