

## WE ARE WHAT WE REPEAT

BY ETHAN MAGNESS

Meaningless repetition can be a dangerous thing.  
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Meaningless repetition can be a . . .

There is some truth to the cliché “you are what you eat,” but it’s even truer that “you are what you continue to eat.” As any diet book will tell you, an occasional dessert will not hurt you and pepperoni pizza with extra cheese is fine for special occasions. But if you permanently replace fruit with ice cream and salads with chocolate pudding, it will catch up to you.

The same is true with positive behavior. Yearly moderate exercise won’t do much for you. Done daily, however, it will change your life for the better. In the long run, I believe it may be true that you are (or you will become) not what you eat, but what you repeat.

### IT JUST KEEPS HAPPENING

This is why Communion is such a powerful part of Christian formation. It just keeps happening. Baptism is certainly more exciting—it has more splash—but it happens once in the life of the believer. Communion, however, is shared every time we gather. Communion is repeated over and over again.

There surely was great excitement on that birthday of the church when 3,000 were baptized. But then everyday life

began: meetings for worship and breaking bread together daily. Baptism into Christ made them all new creations in Jesus. Breaking bread together made them one church, his body. If you keep doing something often enough, long enough, it will change you.

This is why meaningless repetition can be a dangerous thing. Occupational therapists know the simplest acts done often enough can damage our bodies. It is called a repetitive stress injury. It can wear down your wrists or throw out your shoulder or weaken your back or, in the context of worship, damage your faith.

If Communion is a meaningless ritual repeated over and over again, then soon our faith becomes a meaningless ritual. We are what we eat. Poorly chosen songs will warp our theology faster than poorly written books, largely because we sing them so many more times. In the same way, meaningless Communion is a threat to the health of a Christian and the life of Christian community.

### LIFE-CHANGING DISCIPLINE

But it is not all bad news. The power of repetition can also be used for good. Repetition is the key to becoming physically fit, learning a language, perfecting a skill, and developing spiritual discipline. It is, in fact, essential to all meaningful

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growth. The wrong repetition can cause injury, but the right repetition brings strength.

This, too, is a possibility for Communion. It can be the healthy diet, the life-changing discipline that over time shapes us into the likeness of Jesus Christ and gathers us as one body around the table of our one Lord. The early church grew in number and in maturity, not with some complicated scheme but with the steadfast repetition of a few simple commitments.

Recognizing the great potential good and harm of repeated behavior, we must take Communion seriously and we must cultivate its meaning. Something we plan to do only rarely we could risk doing poorly. How much harm would it do? But with Communion, we can take no such risk. Like the early church, it is part of our regular practice. It is our most common practice of worship. The stakes are too high for letting the meaning of this meal be lost or warped. To do so would put our church at risk for a repetitive faith injury.

## THE MEANING OF THE MEAL

At Mountain Christian Church, Joppa, Maryland, we work toward this end in at least three ways. First, and most basically, we use our time at the table to teach the meaning of the table and to connect this meaning to the rest of our Christian walk.

It is, of course, tempting to let the Communion meditation become a second sermon. Those asked to serve at the table are usually those who are “apt to teach” and, consequently, are often apt to teach. This is good, but what is taught must center on the meaning of the meal. That is meaningful repetition.

I am convinced the best Communion meditations are not marked by their innovation but by their explanation. If we must say something new, let it be a new way to tell the same old story. Paul teaches that Communion should proclaim Christ’s death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 11), so must our Communion meditations.

Those who lead at the table must serve like an athletic trainer who watches you exercise to make sure you are

strengthening and not hurting your body. We must call the church back to the cross of Jesus, directing them to partake rightly and warning them of the true danger of meaningless ritual or even rebellion at the table.

To mention the themes of the main sermon is wonderful. To connect with the Scriptures read that day or to the songs that have been sung is worthwhile. But all of this is done only to draw the whole service to its central focus on the saving and community-creating death of Jesus Christ.

Second, and in addition to the weekly teaching about Communion, we take time to specifically teach about Communion. We have done this in special services and on Sunday mornings. In every case the goal is to broaden and enrich the congregation’s understanding of the meal. We give the congregation a language and a mental framework so that the meaning of the meal grows, instead of disappearing, each week they partake. We’ve identified five highlights that we teach whenever we can (see “We Teach, We Remember, We Proclaim” on p. 3).

Third, we celebrate Communion often. That is how exercise works. You do it as well as you can and you do it often. We take Communion weekly (at the least), not simply because this is what the early church modeled, although that would be enough. Rather we take Communion weekly because when done meaningfully it shapes us into the people of God.

Regular Scripture study can form you into a person of the Word. Regular prayer can form you into a person of prayer. Without these regular disciplines, formation does not happen. The same is true with Communion.

The danger posed by meaningless ritual is no reason to stop the ritual. Instead we must infuse our regular practice of Communion with the fullness of meaning that is taught in the Scripture.

As a church and as followers of Jesus, we are what we repeat.

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# We Teach, We Remember, We Proclaim

BY ETHAN MAGNESS

When we prepare for the Lord's Supper, and when we partake of it . . .

- We remember and proclaim that **this meal is a memorial**. Like the Passover meal Jesus was sharing with his disciples, this is a meal of memory. It is a meal rooted in history that finds its most basic meaning, not in the beauty of its symbolism or the power of the ritual, but in the historical facts it remembers and celebrates. Jesus' body was broken and his blood was shed. In the breaking of the bread, we remember and we see Jesus.

- We remember and proclaim that **this meal is a Eucharist**. It is a thanksgiving meal, a celebration filled with joy. We may weep as we remember Christ's death, but we also rejoice at the grace his death brings to us—like a funeral that turns into a party. The Communion cup is a toast to God who has given up so much so that we might be given so much. In the cup we taste and see that the Lord is God.

- We remember and proclaim that **this meal is the Lord's Supper**. We are present at his invitation and by his grace. When we partake, we pledge our lives again to be servants of our Lord, bought with a price. We search our hearts and confess our sin because our sin is rebellion against the Lord who is our host at this table. But we are not crushed in our guilt because, even knowing our sin, he invited us to the table to taste again his grace.

- We remember and proclaim that **this meal is Communion**. We look around the table and see those whom Christ has declared our brothers and sisters. We sit together at the table, not above or below, but alongside. We look down the long table to see brothers and sisters we have never met from other countries and other ages and from every age to come.

Paul asks rhetorically, "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? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:16, 17).

- We remember and proclaim that **this meal is the appetizer and the foretaste for the wedding supper of the Lamb**. Jesus tells the disciples he won't eat this meal again with them until . . . (Luke 22:14-18). The *until* of that declaration is with us whenever we partake. This is the not-yet-quite-begun feast that will one day be fully enjoyed.

The great wedding supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19) will surely be food like nothing we have ever tasted, but it will also be familiar because the feast of this present meal is a foretaste of that great coming meal when we will see our host face-to-face. Every time we eat together we anticipate the fulfillment of Christ's long-remembered promise, "until I eat anew with you in my Father's kingdom."

## Eight Ways to Experience the Meaning of the Meal

BY ETHAN MAGNESS

- Get bigger cups and plenty of juice. Experience the cup as a "cup of thanksgiving." Offer a toast to God and suggest everyone respond, "Thank you," as they drink. In a smaller setting, many people could offer a toast of thanksgiving.

- Decorate your platform with a banquet table. Invite everyone to reflect on the historic feast in which Jesus took his place as the Lamb who was slain for us.

- Get a wedding cake for your Communion table. Teach on Revelation 19, and if you are able, share a piece of cake along with the bread and the cup as a powerful reminder of the hope that is embodied in this meal.

- Consider moving your Communion table. Perhaps move it down from the platform to signify Jesus is present as we gather around the table. Or move it up to the platform to remind us this is the table of the King. Put the table in the center of the platform. This may be awkward, but the symbolic power will be hard to ignore.

- To help people celebrate the gift of the Supper, offer the meal in the midst of a celebratory song set. Choose well-known songs that are beloved by the congregation so people can focus on the meal.

- Give people a chance to repair relationships before they par-

take. Provide time in the service and encourage all to seek out any with whom they have a damaged relationship and then take Communion together.

- Each week during the meal, offer a prayer or Scripture to focus the reflection of the congregation. Include a healthy mix of confession, thanksgiving, remembrance, commitment, and anticipation. Consider replacing text with equally powerful images and symbols.

- Don't forget the most basic memorial function. Sharing the words of institution is a common and powerful way to connect to the historical reality that is the foundation of community. We can never assume that people know what is being remembered in this meal.

Just as the apostle Paul modeled for us, we must always pass on what we have received: "The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

# THE LORD'S SUPPER: UNPRETTY AND UNAVOIDABLE

BY JIM TUNE

The words, “This do in remembrance of me,” are well known to believers everywhere. It’s a less common sight today, but in years past, visitors to Christian churches would see those words carved deep in thick oak tables carefully set front and center. Apparently this gave some comfort to the faithful, and, as far as I can tell, didn’t create any significant offense to visitors and guests.

There’s nothing like revealing your bias in the first paragraph, but I miss the table. Or maybe it’s the inscription I long to see: “This do in remembrance of me.”

Don’t get me wrong—we serve the Lord’s Supper every Sunday at our church. But as a church plant meeting in a school, we’ve opted for portable and light versus wooden and heavy. I also understand there is nothing sacred about the table itself. I’ve seen way too many churches get hung up on furniture and fixtures. What I’m convinced we must not lose is the centrality of the Lord’s Supper to our worship each Lord’s Day.

## A DECISION

Around the time my team and I planted Churchill Meadows Christian Church in Toronto, we began to learn of other new churches that had made the decision not to offer Communion during the worship service, but instead to offer it at another time or in a different room so as not to confuse the uninitiated seeker.

As an unembarrassed pragmatist myself, the idea made some sense to me. We were planting a new church in the world’s most culturally diverse, religiously pluralistic city. Certainly we wanted to be sensitive to the needs of our many non-Christian visitors. We also wrestled with the issue of open Communion in a setting like ours. By setting the table and serving it openly would we be inviting people to partake in an “unworthy manner”?

Ultimately we decided to offer Communion as part of our worship at our first public service and on a weekly basis thereafter. Our launch day was a great success—until the time came to serve the Lord’s Supper. Our opening day attendance far exceeded our wildest expectations. We had hoped to see 150 to 200 people attend. Imagine our astonishment when God led 459 people to walk through our doors that day!

When it came time for Communion, we had to hastily

conscript additional servers from the crowd. Those servers unwittingly continued to serve trays of juice that had already been passed. In other words, they served hundreds of people the half-empty cups that participants had already drunk from and returned to the tray!

Some of the people being served understood what had happened and passed the tray on by. Others drank from the used cups, no doubt wondering why we had been so skimpy with the quantity of juice!

Our team had the discussion again. Perhaps it would be better to offer the Communion experience in a separate room. Nevertheless—and in spite of our messy execution that day—we continued to include it.

## DELIVERING THE DEATH

Why? Here’s our bottom line: *Nothing delivers the death of Jesus like the Lord’s Supper!* The Lord’s Supper, beyond being a memorial, forces us to think about the death of Jesus—specifically his substitutionary atonement to pay for the sins of mankind upon the cross. The Lord’s Supper takes sin seriously. It meets our need with the only solution adequate in scope to our sin: God’s righteousness.

While worship at Churchill Meadows is generally celebrative and upbeat, Communion is a moment of marked sobriety. We don’t care if people find the cross or vivid imagery of broken flesh and shed blood unsettling. It should be! The world would take the pretty symbols and esteem-boosting elements of Christianity and use them for their own purposes. Sometimes the church is tempted to do the same. Instead we must choose the unpretty symbols.

We choose the blood—the blood of the Son of God shed for the forgiveness of our sins. We choose to be washed by it—to be made mindful of its cost and celebrate the wonder of its forgiving miracle deeply in us.

## OUR COMMON NEED

At our young church we teach about the Lord’s Supper in three ways: around the table, in the sermon, and in our membership classes.

We try to avoid cliché-ridden, heart-tugging, chicken-soup-for-the-soul stories around our table. We bring people to the cross to proclaim Christ’s death, to reflect on what was

# The Lord's Supper: Unpretty and Unavoidable

(Continued)

accomplished there, and to remember that he hasn't forgotten us, but is coming back. When we do this it creates a powerful sense of our common need and our unity despite our diversity. In a church like ours, with more than 30 different ethnic groups present for worship, the Lord's Supper creates a profound sense of oneness.

## HELP FOR NEWCOMERS

In our classes for newcomers, we emphasize the following aspects of the Lord's Supper: First, we emphasize the Lord's Supper as a *constant reminder that Jesus made atonement for us*. The symbols themselves convey this. While we don't teach that there is anything mystical or magical about the bread and the grape juice, we emphasize what they symbolize—the Communion we have with God through the blood of Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul said: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13). It is through his death on the cross that the barrier between God and humanity was bridged, and now, through Jesus, we have a personal relationship with God.

We teach the *symbolic significance of the emblems*, explaining that when we partake of the bread we are reminded of the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. The bread symbolizes his body that was broken; it symbolizes his life that was taken. It delivers to our consciousness the truth "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3).

The grape juice symbolizes the blood of Christ. In the Old Testament we see again and again that blood is required for reconciliation with God. The book of Hebrews says, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). At Churchill Meadows we emphasize this very deliberately.

Jesus himself said that through the shedding of his blood—in other words, through his death—we are forgiven. The Bible says we are justified through his blood (Romans 5:9); we have redemption through his blood (Ephesians 1:7); the blood of Jesus purifies us from sin (1 John 1:7); and we have peace with God through Christ's blood (Colossians 1:20). The Lord's Supper brings us face-to-face with this reality. Nothing delivers the death of Jesus like the Lord's Supper.

We also emphasize the Lord's table as a *place of thanksgiving*. In Luke 22:19, the Bible says Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, and broke it. The word rendered "gave thanks" is

*eucharisto*. Some traditions refer to the Lord's Supper as the Eucharist.

We remind our participants that this is a meal of thanksgiving to a God deserving of our gratitude for sending his Son to die on the cross while we were yet sinners. This helps us all remember our salvation is a gift, not a paycheck. We give thanks for what Christ *has* done, and we give thanks in anticipation of what he *will* do at the occasion of his promised return.

Finally—and this aspect is big for us—we emphasize the Lord's table as a *unifying time of Communion with fellow believers*. But we don't stop there. We see it as a compelling call for unity in the midst of our extraordinary diversity.

The United Nations declared that Toronto is the most multicultural city in the world. In the neighborhood where we planted Churchill Meadows, Muslims and Hindus outnumber evangelical Christians! Among adherents to Christianity, Catholics are more numerous here than Protestants, and Evangelical Protestants represent less than 5 percent of the population. This leads to a variety of expectations when a Catholic or Hindu or nominal Muslim is invited to attend. We have discovered the table tends to intrigue, not repel!

Many visitors from other faith backgrounds, while enjoying the style of our worship, seem to actually welcome the moment of decorum that descends upon our worshipers as we partake of the emblems. Catholics resonate with the symbolism and are accustomed to a weekly presentation of the emblems. While we don't embrace the Mass or transubstantiation, Catholic visitors are reassured by our observance of Communion. They reason, "Perhaps this is a 'real' church after all!" And what a witness when visibly diverse ethnicities pray with heads bowed in unity.

When our congregation sings at the top of their lungs: "My sin, not in part but the whole. Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more, Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!" it winsomely announces that the priestly work of Jesus Christ distinguishes Christianity from Islam and Judaism.

We have begun constructing our first building. The design is fresh, innovative, and contemporary. Still, if you have a heavy oak table stowed away in a closet at your church, give me a call. I'm sure we can make use of it!

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*Jim Tune is founding pastor of Churchill Meadows Christian Church in West Toronto, Canada, and founder and director of Impact Canada, a national church planting organization.*

# THE POWER OF MEMORY, THE POWER OF PRESENCE

BY PAUL BLOWERS

Memory is a powerful thing. As many of you know, that fact was driven home very personally for me in the decade that ended in 2004, when my mom at last succumbed to the insidious ravages of Alzheimer's disease.

Watching my mom slowly lose her short-term memory at first and long-term memory later on . . . watching her become increasingly unfamiliar with the familiar . . . watching her in the end look at her family like we were perfect strangers . . . was like watching her lose her very self, her very identity, her very being.

After all, in one sense, we are what we remember.

## A COMMUNITY OF MEMORY

During that very difficult period, I was greatly comforted, believe it or not, by an intensely theological book written by David Keck, a fellow church historian, whose mother also died of Alzheimer's, a disease he calls "deconstruction incarnate." In his book *Forgetting Whose We Are: Alzheimer's Disease and the Love of God* (Abingdon Press, 1996), Keck paints a picture of the church as one magnificent community of memory, which is able with its collective memory of the gracious action of God to remember vicariously on behalf of those Christians who, because of disease or senility, have lost their ability to remember the gracious God.

In reflecting on Keck's book, I was especially comforted by the idea that, while my mom was so very ill and had lost her memory, her family—indeed her larger church family—were all along not only *remembering her* as a beloved saint, but *remembering for her* the Lord Jesus. Vicariously they were remembering that God loved her, that he gave up his only Son for her, to redeem her from her sin and to offer her the grace of everlasting life. Her memory may have dissipated, but the church's memory remains strong and powerful and effective.

And yet, that fact holds true not simply for victims of disease, for those who have lost their memories because of dementia. It holds true for us all. The fact is, the church has been remembering on my behalf for centuries. We all depend on the remembrance of Jesus Christ passed down to us through a living tradition of memory: witnesses in the Bible and beyond the Bible, witnesses throughout church history who have delivered to us the gift of remembrance.

The memory of the upper room, the last supper of Jesus and his disciples, is a huge gift to us from those Christians who have come before us. The Supper was in itself full of memory. It was a Passover meal after all, a reminiscence of all that Yahweh had accomplished for Israel in its escape from Egyptian slavery. And in the Supper, Jesus was committing to the memory of all his disciples, then and since, the sacred actions that epitomized the sacrifice of his own flesh and blood. And he laid before them the anticipation of sharing this Supper with him face-to-face in eternal glory. In effect, Jesus was saying to them, "Remember what my father did for you in the past; remember me and what I am doing for you now; remember what I intend to do for you and with you in the future."

## NO SIMPLE RECALL

But for now, "Do this in remembrance of me." Whole books and commentaries have been written for centuries on what exactly Jesus meant by these words. Scholars of the Greek text have said this remembrance is no simple recall, it is *anamnêsis*, a vital remembrance, a rehearsal of and participation in the sacred events of the past. To remember Jesus in the Lord's Supper is not just to recall him, it is to ratify again our covenant with him such as he instituted in the upper room. To remember him is to enter into intimacy with the Lord who has always and will ever remember us.

To remember him is to recognize that he is not distant or remote, that he is not a memory just floating or hovering over us from our past, but he is himself here with us. He is the host of the Supper, a reality we need not fully explain in conceptual terms because it is a mystery of faith.

That it is a mystery, however, does not make it any less real. We can talk all day about the historic theological explanations of the presence of Christ in the bread and the cup—and there are many that have accrued over the centuries—but the gospel in all of this is that Christ has made himself available to us through the fractured bread that we eat and the fruit of the vine that we drink.

"This is my body . . . This is my blood." We don't need to explain these words, we simply need to receive Christ by faith, and to welcome the crucified and risen Lord into our memories and into our hearts.

# The Power of Memory, the Power of Presence

(Continued)

For the primitive Christians, the Lord's Supper truly created a time warp. The distance in time and space between them and the events of the upper room was sacramentally collapsed as they replayed the events of Jesus' last supper. In partaking of the bread and the wine, they were satisfied, and their cups ran over, and their memories too were filled to the brim.

We may be much further removed than they were from the upper room, but we share the same Supper and the same

memory, the same intimate covenant with Christ. He is with us still, making himself known to us, as he did to the ancient disciples in Emmaus (Luke 24:30, 31), in the breaking of the bread.

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## THE LODGE AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

BY MARK A. TAYLOR

I'm not sure now why I attended the monthly meeting of the local lodge. I had been invited by someone, maybe to pray or see him installed into some office. I don't recall who he was or any specifics about the evening.

I only remember my reaction to being there.

The whole service was meaningless to me, in spite of the sober demeanor of the lodge members who participated in it. They gave complete attention to the words they read from a book. They somberly went through the motions, careful to complete the program "decently and in order." But none of it communicated anything to me.

Many of these men were members of the church I served at the time. I couldn't help but notice at the lodge the same serious concern I had seen on their faces in the worship services of the church. They approached this ceremony with the same sense of propriety they brought to an observance I knew better, our weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper.

I wondered what the lodge service meant to them. And I wondered if the weekly partaking of Communion meant any more—to them, or to me.

Don't get me wrong. I acknowledge the value of repeating a practice that is familiar. We sing "Happy Birthday" to our children every year, and they don't grow tired of it. We give structure to our lives by always eating breakfast before lunch and the salad before dessert. Like flossing or taking our vitamins, spiritual habits—daily prayer, a Bible-reading plan,

tithes, Communion—can keep us healthy.

Every meal need not be a feast, and every observance of the Lord's Supper need not be a production. But neither should it slide into the category of fast food.

It is easy—and far too prevalent, I fear—to approach our Lord's Supper observances thoughtlessly. Week after week we may go through the same motions without engaging members or communicating with newcomers.

This can be true even when other parts of the worship hour get much attention. We create great graphics and find a cool video to illustrate the sermon. The musicians rehearse together and alone to make sure the music will be wonderful. But, while acknowledging the necessity of including Communion, we don't expect it to be a highlight. And too often it is not.

Paul told the Corinthians that by eating the bread and drinking the cup Christians proclaim the Lord's death. There's a message in Communion—for the believer, and also for the watching world.

It would be interesting to poll visitors to our congregations and ask them what they heard and saw in our Lord's Supper observances. Let's hope their take-away is more significant than what I got by visiting the local lodge.

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*Mark A. Taylor is publisher and editor of CHRISTIAN STANDARD.*

# DO WHAT? BOUNDED FREEDOM AT THE TABLE

BY ROBERT F. HULL JR.

If you looked at 100 Communion tables, at least in Protestant churches, what would they have most in common? Whether they are small and cheaply made or huge and ornate, most would prominently display these words: “Do this (or, “this do”) in remembrance of me.”

There are four accounts in the New Testament of the last meal of Jesus with his disciples; we might think all of them include these words, but these words, in fact, are found only in Luke and 1 Corinthians. Still, almost all Christian groups have taken these words as a mandate for the church in perpetuity.

But it is reasonable to ask: Do what? What is the *this* that we are supposed to do? Have a meal, at which time we remember Jesus? Specifically, have a Passover meal (or something like a Passover)?

Well, we might say, “That’s silly. Paul shows in 1 Corinthians that already by AD 51, less than two decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection, this meal had become part of a distinctive Christian worship gathering; it wasn’t just any kind of meal, and it wasn’t a Passover.”

But the question persists: What is the *this* we are supposed to continue to do? Being a people who take the biblical accounts of Christian origins seriously, we want to get it right. If we are church leaders, we want to be sure we are setting the right example for our congregations, that we’re helping them to get it right.

## ANCIENT SOURCES

Being already well-grounded in the historical method, we go to the ancient sources. First, to the *Didache*, which may be dated as early as AD 100-110, where we read this:

Concerning the eucharist, give thanks in this way: First concerning the cup, “We give thanks to you, our Father, for the holy vine of David, your Servant, which you made known to us through Jesus your Servant. To you be the glory forever.” Concerning the broken bread, “We give thanks to you, our father, for the life and knowledge which you made known to us through Jesus your Servant. To you be the glory forever. As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and being gathered together became one loaf, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your

kingdom. Because the glory and the power are yours through Jesus Christ forever” (*Didache*, 9).

There is not a lot of detail about what is *done*; instead attention is drawn to the prayers. And surprisingly, the cup precedes the bread. So, did the *Didachist* get it right? Is *this* the way to do it?

Around a hundred years after Paul wrote to the Corinthians, Justin Martyr addressed an essay to the Roman emperor, Antoninus Pius, explaining who Christians were and what they did in their worship. After describing a baptism and the prayers that followed, he wrote this:

When we cease from our prayers, we greet one another with a kiss. Next there is brought to the president of the brothers bread and a cup of water mixed with wine. Taking these he sends up praise and glory to the Father of all through the name of his Son and of the Holy Spirit and makes thanksgiving at length for the gifts we were counted worthy to receive from him. When he completes the prayers and thanksgiving, all the people present sing out their assent by saying “Amen.” “Amen” in Hebrew means “May it be so.” When the president has given thanks and all the people have made their acclamation, those called by us deacons give to each of those present to partake of the bread and wine mixed with water for which thanksgiving has been given, and they carry some away to those who are absent (*Apology* 1, 65).

So, did Justin correctly identify the *this* that we are supposed to be doing? Have we found the pattern yet?

We reach a watershed in the third century with the so-called *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, theologian and sometime bishop of Rome. His rubric is so long and detailed we haven’t time to include it all, but it begins with a dialogue between the bishop and the people familiar to most of us: “The Lord be with you” . . . “And with your spirit” . . . “Lift up your hearts” . . . “We have them with the Lord” . . . “Let us give thanks to the Lord” . . . “It is meet and right.” The instructions go on to include a prayer intended to be, not a requirement, but a guideline. Somewhat surprisingly, it includes the “words of institution” as part of the prayer itself, including the words,

# Do What? Bounded Freedom at the Table

(Continued)

“When you do this, make my memorial.” It also calls for God to send the Holy Spirit “upon the offering of your holy church.”

If you have worshiped in a Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or Episcopal church you will recognize here the elements that have become standard in the Eucharistic celebration of millions of Christians up to the present time. Did Hippolytus get it right? The ritual he stipulates has been enormously influential, but did he successfully identify the *this*?

## THREE GUIDES

So, what is the *this* we are supposed to do at this table? A Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Presbyterian, or Methodist doesn't need to worry much about answering this question. These churches already have a more or less set liturgy with more or less detailed orders and criteria stipulating what a valid eucharist is, who is empowered to conduct it, and in some cases, precisely what kind of bread must be used, and more.

It is not my point here to criticize any of these arrangements. But those of us in a so-called “free church” tradition worry about such things. We may easily find ourselves worshiping in congregations that seem to have no rules at all, and no historical consciousness—indeed that do not even have a table. How can we keep our freedom from becoming license to simply do whatever takes our fancy? How can we be in recognizable continuity with the church universal and yet maintain the distinction of lay leadership at the table and a good deal of freedom in the details of our practice? Perhaps we can key on those aspects that keep appearing in our historical sources as guides to our own practice, namely on the elements, actions, and words.

He *took* a loaf . . . He took a cup. Whatever form this bread takes as it is consumed by the congregation (whether slick and hard little pellets, matzoh crackers, or the melt-in-your mouth disks so familiar from the Catholic and Episcopalian Eucharist) there ought to be a loaf on the table. Whether the congregation is to have one cup or many and whether you call it a chalice or not, there ought to be a cup on the table.

He broke the bread. Of course, this was a standard beginning in ordinary Jewish meal practices, but the breaking came very early to remind believers of the broken body of Jesus.

The sources do not stress the action of *pouring*, although it seems appropriate. Some references make it clear this is ordinary table wine, which was always mixed with water in older times, so the action of pouring may invite us to remember we are getting ready to dine.

He blessed the elements. There is nothing wrong with sanctified creativity, but, although Hippolytus says it is a good thing if one “can pray suitably with a grand and elevated prayer,” we'll probably be better off if we identify more with those who pray, as Hippolytus says, “in a moderate manner.”

He *said*. Whether you follow the text of Matthew, or Mark, or Luke, or 1 Corinthians, you will never go wrong speaking or reading the words of institution: “This is my body (which is *for* you, or *given* for you, or *broken* for you). . . . This is my blood. . . .”

I would never say you cannot have a valid Eucharist, Lord's Supper, breaking of the bread, Communion, sacrament, mystery, without taking, breaking, pouring, blessing, saying, but I would suggest you are not likely to have as vital a worship practice without these constants. The constants are not rigid barriers set up to straitjacket our worship planning or restrict the Holy Spirit.

I keep a file of memorable Communion service programs from the chapel services at Emmanuel School of Religion. In reviewing them, I am struck by the marvelous diversity of styles and approaches, the wonderful creativity of the students and faculty.

But always the constants are there: Things taken, things done, things said: elements, actions, words. These offer us a bounded freedom, where we have room to grow and mature in understanding, but always remain in touch with those who have preceded us in faith and those in other traditions who walk alongside us in our pilgrimage.

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# THE GREAT ORDINANCE OF UNITY AND LOVE

BY VICTOR KNOWLES

Two hundred years ago an Irishman named Thomas Campbell came to America in hopes of finding a healthier religious climate. But his hopes were dashed when he found in America the same thing he had experienced in Ireland—division among professing Christians. On September 7, 1809, Campbell published the *Declaration and Address*, an irenic document calling for Christian unity. The heart of Campbell is seen in the following statement:

The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else as none else can be truly and properly called Christians.

Robert O. Fife said, “The words of Thomas Campbell profoundly reflect the ‘mind of Christ’ (1 Corinthians 2:16). . . . The unity here conceived is *personal* (all those); *universal* (in every place); *confessional* (who profess their faith in Christ); *sacramental* ([profess] obedience to Him); *Biblical* (in all things according to the Scriptures); and *ethical* (manifest the same by their tempers and conduct).”<sup>1</sup>

In the *Declaration and Address*, Campbell lamented that religious division kept Christians from communing together around the Lord’s table.

What awful and distressing effects have those sad divisions produced! What adversions, what reproaches, what backbitings, what evil surmisings, what angry contentions, what enmities, what excommunications, and even persecutions! . . . How seldom do many in these circumstances enjoy the dispensation of the Lord’s Supper, that great ordinance of unity and love.

This is the only reference to the Lord’s Supper in the *Declaration and Address*, and note it is mentioned in the context of division. Campbell wondered how Christians could enjoy the observance of the Lord’s Supper in such circumstances. His seven-word description of the Lord’s Supper, however, is beautiful: “that great ordinance of unity and

love.” Surely it is worthy of our consideration, examination, and participation.

## THAT GREAT ORDINANCE

Christian churches and churches of Christ have long believed that two ordinances of Christ must be given the highest priority: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Jesus Christ ordained both (Matthew 28:18-20; Matthew 26:26-30). Matthew records that at the Passover Feast with his disciples, Jesus

took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.” Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:26-28).

Luke notes that Jesus told his disciples, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Luke 22:15). Then he took the bread and cup and instituted the Lord’s Supper. We often quote his words of institution in the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Mark 14:22-24).

The first Christians continued in “the breaking of bread” (Acts 2:42). It appears the Christians in Troas made it a practice to break bread on the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day (Acts 20:7). The post-apostolic church continued in the weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper. In the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, we find this description: “But every Lord’s day do ye gather yourselves together, and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, that your sacrifice may be pure.”<sup>2</sup>

## AN ORDINANCE OF UNITY

*Koinonia* is a Greek word that means “communion, fellowship, sharing in common.” Sometimes we use the word *Communion* for the Lord’s Supper. That seems most appropriate, for Communion is a time of rich fellowship at the Lord’s table. Christian churches and churches of Christ practice an “open table” (in contrast to some denominations who offer Communion only to their own members). We have said, “The table is the Lord’s; we neither invite nor debar.”

# The Great Ordinance of Unity and Love

(Continued)

The apostle Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, especially chapters 10-13, emphasizes unity in the observance of the Lord's Supper. He begins by giving an illustration from Israel's history. They were *all* under the cloud, they *all* passed through the sea, and they were *all* baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They *all* ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink because they *all* drank from that same spiritual rock—"and that rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:1-4). You get the picture.

Then Paul transitions to Communion.

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? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf (1 Corinthians 10:16, 17).

"We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13). This is why we enjoy such unity at the Lord's table.

In Communion, we are united in the thought that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). None of us comes to the table unmarred by sin. But we also come to the table united by the reconciling power of God. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). We have been reconciled to God and to each other. The Lord's table is a table of reconciliation. I never feel closer to God or to his people than when I am at the Lord's table.

## AN ORDINANCE OF LOVE

At the Lord's table we are reminded each week of the greatest act of love the world has ever known. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The "words of institution" remind us of this each Lord's Day. "This is My body *which is broken for you*; do this in remembrance of Me" (1 Corinthians 11:24, *New Kings James Version*, emphasis added). "This cup is the new covenant in

My blood, *which is shed for you*" (Luke 22:20, *NKJV*, emphasis added). The apostle Paul testified that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, "loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). Hundreds of hymns have been written about this tremendous demonstration of love, but perhaps Isaac Watts summed it up the best when he wrote: "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

Love for each other should also be experienced and felt at the Lord's table. Are we not "one body," even "one bread," and one in the bond of love? Has not Jesus called us all to be his disciples? Robert O. Fife said,

Jesus called people without reference to each other. He did not ask permission of one disciple before He called another. Each person had the authentic right to be called irrespective of his social status, political views, occupation, or any other personal trait which might not have been shared by the other disciples.

This is especially true when Jesus invites us to his Supper and his table!

"Love is patient, love is kind . . . it keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Corinthians 13:4, 5). The Lord's Supper is an ordinance of love. "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

At the Lord's table, we "keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Here we experience the meaning of a favorite chorus; we are "one in the bond of love" because "we have joined our spirit with the Spirit of God." As Charles F. Brown wrote, in the observance of the Lord's Supper we have "a common love for each other, a common gift to the Savior; a common bond holding us to the Lord."

Yes, Thomas Campbell, you were right. The Lord's Supper is indeed "that great ordinance of unity and love!"

<sup>1</sup>Robert O. Fife, *Celebration of Heritage* (Joplin: College Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup>*The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, Chapter 14, p. 381, The Ante-Nicene Fathers.

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# COMMUNION: WEEKLY OR WEAKLY?

BY TOM LAWSON

One thing virtually all scholars of Christian worship would agree to is that the centerpiece of historical Christian corporate worship was the breaking of bread. This shared meal, with bread and either wine or, in some churches in the modern era, grape juice, is the single most uniquely Christian part of the assembly.

The singing of songs of praise and common beliefs, the sharing of prayers, reading of Scriptures, and exhortations based on those readings were already present in the weekly synagogue gatherings of the first century. These are, of course, dramatically altered with the inclusion of New Testament writings, hymns to Christ, and the presence of both Jews and Gentiles in the service.

The Lord's Supper, though, has no clear precedent.

## THE TABLE IS MOVED BACK

In fact, the progression of a worship service in most eras of the church's history can be described as a Christianized synagogue service, sometimes called the *Service of the Word*. This is followed by the presentation, prayers, and distribution of Communion, sometimes called the Service of the Table. Whatever it is called, all primary worship\* included the breaking of bread as its essential high point.

How is it, then, that early Protestants in 16th-century Switzerland began to gather on the Lord's Day for the Service of the Word, only? The answer rests in both the practice of the Roman Catholic Church of that era, as well as a strong Protestant desire to abandon as much ceremony as possible.

From the early church to the 16th century, the Communion table, usually called an altar, literally moved in the church building. Residing near the center of the building in the fourth and fifth centuries, it had gradually moved farther and farther away from the ordinary believers until, by the time of Reformation, it was often found against the far eastern wall. Separated by a great wood screen, often only a third of the way down the long sanctuary, ordinary worshippers could see or hear little of Mass.

## SEEING IS BELIEVING

They would wait, often standing around talking or praying quietly, until a bell announced the key moment in worship. At the far end of the long sanctuary, the priest would lift a round piece of unleavened bread over his head, as he quietly spoke the words that would call upon God to send the Holy Spirit upon the bread and the wine. This was the

moment the bread, called the Host, would be changed into the actual body of Christ, even though it would still keep all the outward properties of ordinary bread.

It was not partaking in, but seeing Communion that was the real high point of worship. Some have called this ocular (from the word for eye) worship. Official church dogma said the most faithful should take Communion once a year, but it is clear most did not even do that. And so, when the early Protestant churches abandoned the idea that the prayer of an ordained priest actually changed the elements (this is called *transubstantiation*), there was no need to watch it being done weekly.

Once a year was the practice of the most pious, so the churches around Geneva simply carried that pattern into their worship. They would gather weekly, but only for the Service of the Word. Once a year, however, they would gather for the Service of the Table. And this yearly service would emphasize the entire church sharing in both the bread and the wine, another change from Roman Catholic practice of that time.

## THE TABLE IS MOVED OUT

John Calvin, who arrived in Geneva to find this practice already established, openly communicated his unhappiness with it. Communion, he felt, should be observed at least weekly, and by all Christians gathering together. Nevertheless, the practice of once-in-a-long-while Communion would continue and spread, in time, to the Church of Scotland after John Knox had spent several years in Geneva.

From Scotland, of course, it would influence the Puritans of England, and the Presbyterians in the colonies of North America. The tradition of yearly or quarterly Communion common among many American Protestants is largely linked to the practice of Geneva in the 1540s.

So, who moved the table? First, the church itself gradually moved the table farther and farther from the people. Second, and more important for most Protestants, the churches of Geneva removed at least the use of the table in ordinary Sunday morning worship.

## THE TABLE IS BROUGHT BACK

That's where Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell enter into the story. Liturgical scholars are unanimous that the first churches coming out of this Reformed (Church of Scotland, Presbyterian) Protestant tradition to intentionally reject yearly or even quarterly Communion in favor of weekly observance

# Communion: Weekly or Weakly?

(Continued)

are the churches of the American Restoration Movement. This remarkable break with established Protestant tradition to return to the ancient frequency merits Campbell's inclusion in a number of books on the history of worship.

Campbell's reasons seem obvious, as they had also seemed to Calvin three centuries earlier. The practice and precedent of the apostolic church pointed clearly to frequent Communion. So, Christian churches and churches of Christ were quickly labeled by two practices that separated them from many of their Protestant neighbors: baptism and weekly Communion.

So, who moved the table from once-a-year back to a center place in worship? Well, Alexander Campbell and the other early leaders of the Restoration Movement. So, all's well that ends well, right? Not exactly.

## BEYOND THE RIGHT FREQUENCY

Although Campbell had the insight and courage to challenge the weakened view on baptism common among many Protestants of that era, he wrote little about the Lord's Supper except on its frequency. Christian churches and churches of Christ would celebrate the Lord's Supper each Sunday. In addition, until the turn of the century, the Lord's Supper would exist within the assembly as its single most important moment. This made Sunday worship in the churches of the Restoration Movement structurally closer to Anglican or Lutheran worship than to either Baptist or Presbyterian. (There were, however, dramatic differences in both doctrines and styles and forms of worship).

In the absence of any clear understanding about the nature of the Lord's Supper, however, the common language of other American Protestants became the language used to tell people how to understand the meal. Words like *emblematic* and *memorial* entered into the vocabulary of Sunday table worship so often it is surprising neither term is strictly biblical.

In time, people absorbed the idea that the purpose of the Lord's Supper is to think about Jesus. The outward physical elements are just "signs" (a term borrowed from Reformed theologies) that serve as object lessons for us to meditate on the cross.

Such a view seems wholly inadequate in light of Paul's outright assertion that the loaf and cup are a sharing (*koinin-ia*) in the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16, 17) and that carrying out the Lord's Supper badly can result in a person being "guilty of sinning against the body and blood of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:27). Furthermore, doing it badly can not only make you sick, it can downright kill

you (1 Corinthians 11:30). If the only purpose is to think about Jesus and the dangers of doing it badly are so terrible, I'll just sit here and think about Jesus, listening to some nice music and reading my Bible, thank you very much.

Of course, the great question of the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation looms in the background. How can we suggest the Lord's Supper should be understood as more than just emblematic or as a memorial service for a beloved fallen hero? Talk about actually sharing in the body and blood of Christ in the meal, and some will no doubt be ready to search your office for hidden pictures of the pope or the virgin Mary.

Humor aside, is it ever a good idea to wholly reject something the Bible appears to suggest as true simply because it sounds like what another group believes? Can "sharing" in the body and blood of Jesus through the Lord's Supper be understood in terms other than the doctrine of transubstantiation as described by the Fourth Lateran Council?

Are there other ways of understanding 1 Corinthians 10:16, 17 and 11:23-33 that allow for a genuine participation in the very presence of Christ that do not imply Christ is being sacrificed or sins are being forgiven? I am certain there are. But, most troubling, what good is there in celebrating Communion weekly if we are also celebrating it weakly?

I have nothing but admiration for Alexander Campbell and the generation that moved so courageously beyond the church they had been given toward the church they believed God wants. But it is high time for their descendants to look with fresh study and renewed courage at our practice of weekly Communion.

I sincerely believe the breaking of bread was and ought to be both present and central in the weekly worship of all Christians in all places. But, and I say this after much thought, if I had only two choices, I'd rather worship at a church that took it yearly—but with a full appreciation of its wonder and fear of its potential dangers—than to take it weekly at a church that seems to be aware of neither.

I can think of few subjects more immediately in need of reexamination and discussion among the leadership of our churches than the practice and meaning of the Lord's Supper.

\*This would not be true of groups gathering just for times of daily prayer or Bible readings. By *primary worship* I mean the gathering (at least ideally) of the whole church for the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer.

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# ALL SWALLOWED UP, ROW AFTER ROW

BY PAUL S. WILLIAMS

I conducted a retreat for a healthy, rapidly growing new church. As I talked informally with a number of men, one made an enlightening comment. He said, “I wish I could convince our minister that Communion is as important as baptism.” He expressed displeasure at the perfunctory way in which Communion was approached, something he felt was unfortunate given the heavily Roman Catholic region in which the church was planted. I told him that I, too, was equally confused by the low priority given to the observance of the Lord’s Supper.

It has not always been that way. In fact, throughout history many believers have suffered greatly because they chose to take their place at the table. The English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins left the comfort of what was certainly going to be a respectable life teaching at Oxford because of how he felt about the presence of Christ in Communion. He lost family and friends when he changed churches.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was profoundly disturbed when he was alone in the desert without the elements of the Lord’s Supper. Having learned the joy of regular Communion, he creatively consecrated the whole earth as the bread, and its sufferings as the cup. He was in the desert no more!

My barber’s Italian father has been going to church since he was an infant. She says even though he is a tough New York longshoreman, he always cries during Communion.

Her father does not understand why he cries, she said, but he never holds back the tears. He finds the experience to be cleansing.

The neurologist Oliver Sacks tells of a man losing his mind whose last bastion of sanity was participation in the Lord’s Supper. Generation upon generation has found similar solace, strength, and hope through weekly observance of the ordinance.

I remember talking with an economically impoverished woman in my first ministry in the mountains of southeastern Kentucky. Every Sunday afternoon I took Communion to her in the home she and her husband shared up a creek bed in a narrow hollow.

“I want to come back to church as soon as my hip can hold the weight,” she told me. “I want the big Communion tray—not this tiny one in a box. I want the big one—filled with empty cups as it comes to me in the back of the church, the blood of Christ all swallowed up row after row.” I did not debate theology. I marveled at the image.

Communion will last beyond the current fad of relegating it to the back burner of contemporary worship. It will thrive beyond any feeble attempts to cool it off through inattentiveness. It just means too much to the life of the church, all swallowed up row after row.

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