

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Every Baptist church will, at some point, have the Lord's Supper at the heart of a service of worship. We believe that participating in such a service is a gospel command (Luke 22:29 1 Cor 11:24-25).

The title of this service may vary from church to church but the various names used all point helpfully to different insights about the meal. The Lord's Supper reminds us of the meal in the upper room before the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus. Communion draws on the word *koinonia* (meaning 'fellowship') and points to the deep sense of sharing and belonging which opens up between believers and with Christ himself. The Eucharist (meaning 'thanksgiving') reminds us that we come thankful that the Son of God has died on the cross for us and was raised on the third day.

Whatever title your church uses the service ought to be a focal point for all believers to gather and share together in thanksgiving and fellowship with each other and with the Lord Jesus, who summons us to the feast. Some acts of worship have a very definite structure with service books and printed liturgies, others have a more informal style. All draw us back to the essentials of the communion as revealed in the Bible.

ROOTED IN JESUS CHRIST

The basic point about the meal is that we 'Do this in remembrance of me' (1 Cor 11:24-25).

When we gather we will, inevitably, remember that meal in the upper room where the Jewish meal was given a special significance by Jesus (see Luke 22:14-19 or 1 Cor 11:23-34). It provided him with a powerful image of how his death becomes the key to abundant life. We cannot share in such a meal without experiencing something of the agony and cost of the events in the garden of Gethsemane and on the hill of Golgotha.

Yet the meal is much more than the remembering of a dead martyr. It also has the joy and celebration of the foretaste of the heavenly banquet. For we also recall other meals where Jesus broke the bread, especially after his resurrection. The disciples on the road to Emmaus on Easter Day did not recognise the risen Christ but, at the table when he broke the bread, 'their eyes were opened and they recognised him' (Luke 24:13-32).

ROOTED IN THE FELLOWSHIP

The meal is an expression of fellowship with Christ and with the church militant, that is, those who gather with us in our church and in other churches near and far. It also joins us with the church triumphant, those Christians who have gone before us in hope but who shared the communion in their own day and age. We do not come to the meal on our own, simply to engage in a private spiritual experience, though individual participation and reflection on the communion is for many a real moment of spiritual growth, but with a company of believers (Matt 18:20; 1 Cor 10:16-17).

There has been much debate amongst Christians down through the ages as to what Jesus actually meant when he said 'this is my body... this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you'. Whatever we understand by this we look for a deepening of our lives in Christ and a strengthening of the bonds of love amongst the believers as we share in the service together. One sign of that communion with one another, which Baptists have recently recovered, is the exchanging of the Peace by some simple gesture such as a handshake or an embrace

ROOTED IN WORSHIP

The early disciples met in homes both for this meal and for worship. They did this in addition to their regular attendance at services in the Temple or synagogue. But this soon changed and house worship developed, with people meeting on the first day of the week, rather than on the Jewish Sabbath. Then sharing in the re-telling of the life of Jesus and the events surrounding his ministry; prayers for the people and breaking the bread became a single service which included the elements of praise, prayer, proclamation and sharing. This service of word and sacrament, as we often refer to it, recalls all that the church came to see as right and picks up the insights recorded by Paul in Acts 2:41-42.

Whilst some parts of the Christian church emphasise either word or sacrament most Baptist churches now understand that true and full worship includes both.

Many parts of the Christian family hear the word and share in communion as the main service each Sunday. An increasing number of Baptists do too. Some Baptists celebrate communion twice a month, others much less frequently. Monthly or quarterly communion services are often preceded by special services of preparation and the participation in the communion service is seen as a great moment of significance in the life of the believer.

Whether you worship in a church that celebrates weekly, twice a month or quarterly, the emphasis always ought to be on coming to worship anxious to hear the word of God and reverently, though with joy, to share in the meal.

Why not reflect on the practice of your own church and ask the minister and deacons to share with you their reasoning about the pattern and frequency of sharing in the Lord's Supper?

ROOTED IN UNITY

The worship we enter into around the Lord's Table, therefore, is a unity. In true Biblical fashion we join in praise and adoration, confess our sin, listen to the word read and proclaimed, and join in prayers for each other and the world. Having shared the peace we will join in the communion where the drama engages us as those redeemed by Christ and called into his service, in a community of others redeemed and called.

Here, there is no distinction made between rich and poor, female and male, young and old, by origin, ethnic grouping or social background. The gospels effect in bringing about social equality was one of the dynamic features of the early church and when Paul hears that the Corinthian Christians failed to model this in their worship he quickly challenged their sinful divisions (1 Cor 11:17-22). Social divisions have no place at the Lord's table.

The communion then is a mark of the radical and distinctive lifestyle of Christian believers so it is sad that it is still a point of division in that not all the Christian community gives to every believer the opportunity to share fully in the meal. Yet despite misconceptions and difficulties the heart of the sharing is about our unity in Jesus Christ.

Most Baptist churches, but not all, welcome Christians from other churches and denominations to share in the Lord's Supper. This is done during worship by inviting those who love our Lord Jesus Christ and desire to be his true disciples to share in the meal.

For some Baptists the Lord's table can only be shared by those bound together in a local covenant of faith. For the majority of Baptist there are occasions when our wider interdependency, exhibited in associating together in a county or a national union, is expressed in our breaking bread together. It has recently become the practice of many county Associations to hold a communion service within the context of an assembly and in most years the national Baptist Assembly has a communion service at which the President or other Union Officers play a prominent part.

Our pattern is based on what is recorded in scripture with a single loaf, broken into pieces and shared amongst those gathered. This was followed by a cup of wine passed round amongst the believers so that all drank from the one cup. That pattern was true for the first Baptists.

In more recent times a practice grew up of cutting the bread into small cubes before the service and passing these round on a plate. Today, in the majority of our churches, there will be a single loaf broken by the minister after the prayer of thanksgiving, and then passed around for everyone to break off a small piece. Similarly, in the sixteen and seventeen hundreds our churches all used a single cup or chalice. At the beginning of the twentieth century, on the grounds of hygiene, individual cups began to be introduced to our churches. Today they are the most common form of serving the wine, though often a larger cup is placed at the centred of the communion table.

However, in common with Baptists in many other parts of the world, some churches are returning to the use of the single cup, particularly for house communions or communion services at the great festivals such as Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.

Why not reflect on what happens in your church worship. Do these actions help express all that the communion service seeks to convey? Do you experience unity with those with whom you worship and with Christ?

The meal, naturally, is shared as we recall the passion of Jesus, his death upon the cross of our sin. Yet, too, the joy of the resurrection belongs to the meal and is often particularly signified by singing a hymn or scripture song, after eating and drinking, which focuses on the themes of resurrection and the ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God.

ROOTED IN SERVANT LEADERSHIP

No one who believes comes as a passive spectator. All are caught up in worship in word, song and action. Nevertheless, to be scriptural and see that things are done decently and in good order, some are appointed to certain specific tasks.

The role of the pastor (minister or preacher) includes seeing the word is shared and proclaimed. Nowadays often the pastor will say the great prayer of thanksgiving, which proclaims what God in Christ has done, invokes the Holy Spirit and acclaims the gospel of grace.

The deacons or elders will often serve the bread and wine demonstrating that Christian leadership is about serving. Increasingly, they will also offer prayers for the fellowship, and for those with particular burdens and those who cannot be present around the communion table. Where better for the community of faith to pray for one another and for the great needs of the world than around the table which speaks of sacrifice and glory?

Again, we are living in a time of renewed emphasis of the healing ministry within the life of the church. It is an increasingly common practice for there to be opportunity for individuals around the table to be able to seek the laying on of hands and prayer for wholeness and healing after the communion has been shared and before all are sent out to witness in the world.

ROOTED IN MISSION

It was John Wesley who believed communion, rightly celebrated, was a means used by the Holy Spirit to convince people of their sin and need of God. The Church has not always believed this. Some argue that communion is so much at the heart of true discipleship that sharing in it, whether by observation or participation, is not to be encouraged except for those who have been baptised and are active believers. Some who hold this belief feel that only those who have been baptised should be present and share in the meal.

There is a strength in that argument and certainly no one should share in the meal ‘in an unworthy manner’ in case, in doing so, they bring judgement on themselves (1Cor 11:23-34).

Yet to be present at a well-conducted communion service perhaps following the baptism of a believer who then receives communion, is to be in a setting where the Holy Spirit can and does help others to see the power and good news of Jesus.

Because we believe communion is for the believer and normally follows baptism as a believer, it is not unusual for children to be present and certainly unusual for them to receive bread and wine. Some churches have children present on special occasions and then the deacons may offer a sign of the love and prayers of the community by laying hands on children as they distribute the bread and wine.

At the close of worship the call to mission is sounded. Here is not the place for mutual blessing, but rather a call to action – the feast is ended, the world is waiting, go therefore in the name of Christ to love and serve the world.

ROOTED IN HOPE

The joyful note of sending disciples into the world to co-operate with God in his mission reflects the truth with which we started. We remember not only the agony and pain of the crucified Lord, but we remember also his resurrection on the third day. We also anticipate that heavenly banquet at the end of time, when God’s kingdom of justice, peace and righteousness will be established in glory and power (1 Cor 11:26; Rev 19:9).

In a world where so many actions and events can lead us to the very brink of despair, the Lord’s Supper points us back to the message that in Jesus we see the full reality of God, who, by his Spirit, is even now making all things new. As the grain once scattered on the hillsides was gathered in to become one in the loaf, so the people of God will be gathered together from the ends of the earth into his kingdom.

In thanksgiving (Eucharist) we have that hope.

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