

The Lord's Supper

Draft
Mrs Audrey Porter

XIII. The Lord's Supper

We believe that the Memorial and Communion Supper instituted by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is essentially a New Testament sacrament, declarative of His sacrificial death, through the merits of which believers have life and salvation and promise of all spiritual blessings in Christ. It is distinctively for those who are prepared for reverent appreciation of its significance, and by it they show forth the Lord's death till He come again. It being the Communion feast, only those who have faith in Christ and love for the saints should be called to participate therein.

The Lord's Supper has a number of names within the wider church community including the Eucharist, Communion, Holy Communion, Thanksgiving and the Lord's Table. It has traditionally been viewed as the 'crown of the sacraments'¹ and was viewed by Wesley as one of the 'chief' means of grace; those means of grace that were 'not incidental to Christian Spirituality' but rather formed the 'bedrock'.² It is a vital act of pastoral care 'no pastoral act is more central to the care of souls...'³

The Lord's Supper, *instituted by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is essentially a New Testament sacrament.* The account of the institution of the Lord's Supper is found in the synoptic gospels and in 1 Corinthians. These four accounts, while not identical, report in common that Jesus 'took bread' 'gave thanks' distributed the bread with the instruction 'take and eat, this is my body.' Luke and 1 Corinthians add 'given for you [which is for you], do this in remembrance of me.' It is then recorded in the four accounts that Jesus 'took the cup' and 'gave thanks.' Here Luke and 1 Corinthians vary from the first two synoptic accounts which record that Jesus 'said this is the blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sin...I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from not until that day when I drink it anew with you in my fathers kingdom [in the

¹ Geoffrey Wainwright. *Doxology. The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life.* A Systematic Theology. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1984) 78-79.

² Lester Ruth. 'Word and table. A Wesleyan model for balanced worship.' in *The Wesleyan Tradition. A Paradigm for Renewal.* Paul W. Chilcot (ed) (NashvilleTN: Abingdon Press, 2002)138.

³ Thomas C Oden. *Classical Pastoral Care. Volume 2 Ministry Through Word and Sacrament.* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1987) 154.

kingdom of God].’ Luke and 1 Corinthians recording ‘this is the cup of the new covenant in my blood poured out for you’ and 1 Corinthians adding ‘do this whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me’ John 6:28-58 which mentions the last supper, while not directly reporting the institution of the Lord’s Supper provides material additional to that located in the four accounts of the institution: ‘Jesus said I am the bread of life...Jesus said ...whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life’ These accounts preserved in scripture provide needed practical and doctrinal norms for the celebration of communion. ⁴

Despite its institution in the New Testament the Eucharist has its roots strongly in the Old Testament Passover and the instructions found for its commemoration in Exodus 12:1-14. In commemorating the Passover they were to ‘...relive in ritual form the original deliverance from the bondage in Egypt “throughout the generations”...a belief in, almost an experience of the saving power of the Lord who “by a strong hand brought us out of Egypt”’⁵ The Passover however is not only a meal of remembrance; it is also ‘*a looking forward to the coming deliverance of which the deliverance from Egypt is a prototype.*’⁶ At this time of remembrance of the old covenant, Jesus establishes the new covenant as ‘a mighty deliverance, with universal significance, did in fact take place through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.’⁷

The Lord’s Supper is a *memorial supper declarative of His sacrificial death through the merits of which believers have life and salvation and promise of all spiritual blessings in Christ.* Both Luke’s and Paul’s accounts of the last supper include the statement that the disciples are to ‘do this in remembrance of me’ or ‘do this as a memorial of me’ (Luke 22:19, 1 Cor 11:24).⁸ Its meaning is not uniformly agreed; the image here may be of the remembrance of *Him* or alternatively as Jeremias suggests, that ‘the Eucharist is observed

⁴ Wainwright, 161, 275.

⁵ Wainwright, 153.

⁶ Joachim Jeremias. *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*. Translated by Norman Perrin. (London: SCM Press, 1966), 206. Italics authors own.

⁷ Wainwright, 153.

⁸ Staples 232.

to remind *God* about *Jesus* and what he has done for our salvation.’⁹ However this ‘memorial’ is interpreted in the Lord’s Supper the ‘...bread and wine sings of his body, [a] proclamation of his death until he comes again...’¹⁰ In the Lord’s Supper the sickness of sin in the world, is confronted by the death of Christ the source of the ‘redemption healing of brokenness in the world’ and ‘healing in the lives of the Christians.’¹¹

It is distinctively for those who are prepared for reverent appreciation of its significance, and by it they show forth the Lord’s death till He come again. The celebration of the Lord’s Supper is profoundly more than a remembrance. Paul in 1 Corinthians argues ‘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? (10:14-21)’ Jeremias notes there was commonly a blessing of bread and wine at table fellowship and then all would say ‘amen’ and then participate making them ‘recipients in the blessing.’¹² In the last supper Jesus added the words ‘which referred the broken bread and the red wine to his atoning death for “many”....meaning ...that by *eating and drinking he gives them a share in the atoning power of his death.*’¹³ Participation in the Lord’s Supper is, then, a Confession of faith as participants ‘declare our belief that we are included in the scope of God’s action and have been touched by it...’¹⁴

For Wesley communion was an instrument of grace, not just of remembrance, enabling participants ‘to partake of Christ’s activity now “to grace and mercy, still lasting, still *new*, still the same as when it was first offered for us.”’¹⁵ Redemption, like creation, is a gift of God to humanity¹⁶ and at the Lord’s Table communicants ‘can see and feel what God’s grace in Christ is like.’¹⁷ The sacrament is ‘...within [the] enduring relationship between God and a world which continues to depend on God as its creator and for which

⁹ See for instance Staples 232f and Jeremias 237f

¹⁰ Wainwright, 46.

¹¹ Lorna Lock-Nah Khoo. *Wesleyan Eucharistic Spirituality*. (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2005) 202ff.

¹² Jeremias, 233ff. italics authors own

¹³ Jeremias, 233ff. italics authors own

¹⁴ Wainwright, 78.

¹⁵ Ruth 138.

¹⁶ Wainwright, 78-79.

¹⁷ Ruth 138.

God has a purpose? ¹⁸ The sacrament then ‘is a living sign of the...gospel, now in a tangible and visible form.’ ¹⁹ It is also a sign of our response to the gospel, of acceptance, and a commitment to ‘live according to an ethic of gratitude’ and ‘to offer ourselves in response to Christ.’ ²⁰

It being the Communion feast, only those who have faith in Christ and love for the saints should be called to participate therein.

The Lord’s Supper is, then, a feast of communion of the brothers and sisters in the faith. God’s grace is experienced and responded to not by individuals alone but by a community of faith. This sense of community is expressed in early Methodist worship, in the songs of praise the prayer and exhortation and where ‘brotherly and sisterly love [is] seen to both require human effort and to depend for its origin and continuance on divine grace.’ ²¹ Eucharistic rites traditionally include the confession of sin against others, prayers of intercession for people, the exchange of peace and the sharing of the one bread and the one cup in table fellowship. ²² This community of fellowship, in Wesleyan experience, ‘is such that it can be scarcely broken by death.’ ²³ Through the communion of the Lord’s Table the body of believers continues to grow and is changed and shaped

In the Eucharist we experience the enhancement of all that the body of believers have so far learnt in the way of positive human community, the right use of the earth’s resources and saving fellowship with God. In all sacramental action God is present to transform to his own moral and spiritual likeness those who consent to the values of his kingdom. ²⁴

One significant aspect of the communion of the believers at the Lord’s Table is unity. Just as there is ‘one Lord, one faith, one baptism’ so there is one communion table. At the communion table the value and worth of all is clearly affirmed as demonstrated in the death of Christ for all. Our place at the Lord’s Table is purchased by Christ, and the

¹⁸ Wainwright, 83.

¹⁹ Ruth 138.

²⁰ Wainwright, 78-79.

²¹ Wainwright, 421.

²² Wainwright, 421. Oden notes that while preparation for communion should still involve confession although not in the Roman catholic sense. Oden, 138.

²³ Wainwright, 111-2.

²⁴ Wainwright, 83.

response to that expression of the value and worth of humanity to God requires the demonstration of our unity as a community in Christ. In tradition: ‘...that the Eucharist especially is considered to be a participation in the worship of heaven...’ a worship in which all believers are encompassed.²⁵ Wainwright argues that

To celebrate the Eucharist together clearly requires some measure of existing unity. Complete disunity makes a common celebration improper if not unthinkable’ (Cor 11: 17-34) ... The Eucharist not only seals an existing unity brought from the past: it also “leads forward” the communicants into a future where the unity will be greater...it is a means of *grace*. As a creative anticipation of the future, a present taste which whets the appetite for the messianic banquet in the completed kingdom, the Eucharist is fulfilling an eschatological function in history. Granted the final superiority of eschatology over history, the Eucharist is more important for *what it makes of us* than for what it expresses to be true of us...we should be ready to let common participation in the Eucharist promote reconciliation among partially disunited communities which are seeking to overcome existing differences and so come to a closer companionship in the progress towards the kingdom.²⁶

The Lord’s Supper is a sacrament which, while firmly embedded in the practices of scripture, both Old Testament and New Testament, looks, and has from the beginning, equally firmly to the future. Christ will come again and the promises of Christ be fulfilled. The Eucharist is ‘both the sacrament of eternal life already begun and also the promise of resurrection by Jesus at the last day (John 6).’²⁷ It is a the reminder and foretaste of the future as well as the past,

in the early centuries of Christianity the paschal sense of expectancy was maintained, now transposed to the awaited final parousia of Jesus Christ at Easter time. Moreover there are hints that the early Christians saw their Eucharist as the successor of the Jewish Passover, and this will account in part for the eschatologically charged atmosphere which surrounded the sacrament from the first and has never entirely disappeared.’²⁸

Contextual Issues and Reflections.

The Asia- Pacific region is one of multiple faiths, with significant levels of animism and Roman Catholicism, ethic and cultural diversity, including areas of rampant materialism, and varying degrees of harmony in the relationships of these groups. Divisions as a consequence of ethnic and cultural diversity, with its accompanying questions of

²⁵ Wainwright, 111-2.

²⁶ Wainwright, 318.

²⁷ Wainwright, 154.

²⁸ Wainwright, 154.

reconciliation, independence and justice are endemic throughout humanity including the Asia-Pacific. In Australia the reconciliation of the aboriginal and white communities continues to be ongoing.

Recent scholarship has seen an increased appreciation of the of the meal symbolism associated with the Lord's Supper.²⁹ The last supper is one of a series of meals Jesus takes, not only with his disciples, but with sinners and outcasts in a culture where 'every [table] fellowship is a guarantee or peace, of trust, of brotherhood...is a fellowship of life.'³⁰ Through the Lord's Supper unity is not only expressed but built and strengthened. The sacrament has the potential to transcend the differences in language, culture and ethnicity. In the celebration of communion Christians re-enact the worth and value given by God to everyone, in the presence of those who are different and in terms of the values of the kingdom of God. As there is only one communion, each table being a part of the greater banquet, in a profound way this occurs in the presence of all believers, wherever they are physically located.

The Lord's Supper is a 'chief' means of grace and a key sacrament and it is of particular importance, in a multi-faith context, that the understanding of the Lord's Supper be communicated in a way that is culturally relevant and appropriate but effective in providing a deep and sound understanding. The difficulty of reshaping worldviews is well-known. Long-held beliefs and understandings may be syncretistically assimilated into a developing Christian understanding or alternatively the Christian understanding may become a thin veneer over the existing worldview.

While the use of the liturgy, regrettably brief, in the Nazarene manual, is an important part of the developing a Nazarene understanding of communion, cultural differences in learning and understanding impact the way this is used. Khoo suggests that while the liturgy has a role in spiritual formation, intensive teaching, practical exercises and action oriented programs are also important 'in a society which emphasizes the collective,

²⁹ Wainwright 32.

³⁰ Jeremias 204.

rather than the individual, people prefer less use of words...group members learn intuitively the shared values...words are not needed as much to convey communally known issues'³¹

Many churches in Asia continue to 'share their own cultures innate belief in the impingement of the supernatural upon everyday life. Personal spiritual experiences are valued highly even in what seems to be Western-orientated and highly technological societies eg Singapore.'³² In communion all the senses are involved including the sense of taste, it touches the head and heart, the affection and the imagination, especially through the use of hymns.³³ This involvement of all senses is of particular value in less literate societies but also in reinforcing the connection between creation and redemption, as the gifts of God to humanity, and bread and wine as the present concretation of God's gifts of creation.³⁴

the physicality of the bread and the wine, the expected sensory and physical experience of the Eucharistic encounter with Christ, makes the Eucharist a very special means of grace...affirms the wholeness of the human person and the goodness of creation...here, as nowhere else, the person with *all* his or her human faculties touched by the divine. The material world is affirmed and appreciated as a possible instrument of his love.³⁵

Despite its significance as a means of grace and the spiritual formation inherent in its celebration communion is the 'least likely' of the chief means of grace, 'to find constancy in the spirituality of the contemporary worshipper.'³⁶ While changes in the physical and cultural landscape have resulted in a change of attitude to the sacrament³⁷ this does not appear to be an entirely recent development, as both Luther and Calvin encouraged a

³¹ Khoo 227-229. see also Ruth.

³² Khoo, 219. Khoo considers that 'The era of enlightenment with its enthronement of reason in the West has not made a great impact on the growing Methodist churches in the two-thirds world (eg Asia and Africa) many of which can be considered 'evangelical' and/or 'charismatic' in theological orientation and practice.' This can be extrapolated beyond the Methodist church.

³³ Khoo, 182ff.

³⁴ Wainwright, 78-79.

³⁵ Khoo, 208.

³⁶ Ruth, 138.

³⁷ Khoo, 216. Khoo includes increased emphasis on reason rather than experience, impact of non-sacramental groups, the focus on communion as a meal of fellowship. Changes in worship style, hymnody and the changing agendas of Methodist groups in the face of new challenges and developments, including an increased focus on conversion, also had an impact.

greater frequency of communion.³⁸ It is generally agreed that loss of the celebration of regular communion in the Wesleyan churches including, in some instances, the Church of the Nazarene is not only regrettable but is out of step with their Wesleyan heritage. Wesley's own view of the Lord's Supper supports the celebration of weekly communion, its disuse being 'antithetical to the Wesley's teaching and their own spirituality...'³⁹

CONCLUSION

The Lord's Supper is not just a key sacrament of the church, it is a profoundly rich means of grace and of spiritual formation. Instituted by Jesus in the New Testament on the strong foundation of the Passover, the Lord's Supper '...sets forth before Christians, as the Passover meal had done before the 'Israelite,' a physical, tangible reminder of who they are, whose they are, what they are called to be and what they are called to do.'⁴⁰ In the Lord's Supper the grace of God is affirmed, quietly confronting the need of humanity for forgiveness, redemption and healing. The offering of self to Christ as Lord and Saviour in response to the sacrifice of Christ is an important part of the communion service as is the expression of unity and community implicit in the celebration of communion.⁴¹ A deep appreciation of the Lord's Supper is part of our heritage as Wesleyans, a depth of understanding of the many facets of the sacrament.

The Eucharist may be understood as that means of grace, instituted by Jesus Christ, to which we are invited for repentance, for self-examination, for renewal, for spiritual sustenance, for thanksgiving, for fellowship, for anticipation of the heavenly kingdom and for celebration in our pilgrimage towards perfection in the image of Christ.⁴²

³⁸ Wainwright, 327.

³⁹ Ruth, 13, see also Khoo, 181.

⁴⁰ Khoo, 192.

⁴¹ Khoo, 192.

⁴² Staples 202.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Jeremias, Joachim. *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*. Translated by Norman Perrin. London: SCM Press, 1966.
- Khoo, Lorna Lock-Nah. *Wesleyan Eucharistic Spirituality*. Adelaide: ATF Press, 2005.
- Oden, Thomas C. *Classical Pastoral Care. Volume 2 Ministry Through Word and Sacrament*. Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1987
- Ruth, Lester. 'Word and table. A Wesleyan model for balanced worship.' in *The Wesleyan Tradition. A Paradigm for Renewal*. Paul W. Chilcot (ed) Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 2002.
- Staples, Rob L. *Outward Sign and Inward Grace. The Place of the Sacraments in Wesleyan Spirituality*. Kansas City MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1991.
- Geoffrey Wainwright. *Doxology. The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life. A Systematic Theology*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1984
- _____ *Eucharist and Eschatology*. Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2003.