

DAILY DOSE OF DOCTRINE

September 8-12, 2008



Sept. 8. 2008

'Real' Presence

*"While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.'"*¹

At the time of the Reformation, sincere Christians differed sharply regarding their understanding of the Lord's Supper.

The Roman Catholic Church continued to affirm the doctrine of 'transubstantiation'. Based on Aristotelian metaphysics, they taught that when the priest declared 'this is my body'², the bread was actually transformed into the body of Christ. From a human sensory perspective it did not look, smell or taste different. But it was truly changed so that the recipient was receiving the true body of our Lord.

At the other end of the spectrum, Zwingli and the Anabaptists declared that the sacrament was a mere remembrance. It is a powerful, sensory aid to faith and thanksgiving, but little more.

Calvin and the Reformed Churches tried to occupy a middle position. They rejected transubstantiation because it tended to foster magical thinking and superstition. At the same time they felt that the Sacrament was more than a teaching aid. Instead they argued that Christ is 'spiritually present' for believers in the sacrament. The bread and wine are not transformed in a physical way, but Christ is truly and powerfully with his people as they celebrate Holy Communion in faith. It is a means for God to strengthen our faith and nurture our spirits. Exactly how Christ is present is a mystery, but we believe he is present in a unique and glorious fashion.

¹ Matthew 26:26 (TNIV)

² In Latin: 'hoc est corpus me' – a mangled version of which became 'hocus pocus' used in magical spells!

Sept. 9, 2008

Communion: Past

“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.’”¹

The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is extremely rich in its symbolism. However, broadly speaking, it has past, present and future dimensions.

The primary focus of the sacrament is to look to the past. We are repeatedly and specifically called to remember. We remember his passion and suffering as Jesus bore, in his body, our sins upon the cross. We remember that his blood was shed to atone for the sins of the world. We remember that he willingly gave his life that we might be forgiven and have the opportunity to be children of God once again.

As the sacrament enables us to relive and remember, it evokes thanksgiving² in our hearts for God’s overwhelming love and glorious grace. It evokes awe that he would value us so much. At the same time it calls us to reflect that it was OUR sins that placed Christ upon the cross. It therefore summons us to repentance and to amendment of life.

This focus upon the past aspect of the sacrament is not ‘mere’ remembering. As with the Passover, we are called to personally enter into the historic drama – to relive and to own it as our own history. It is a ‘memorial service’ in the best sense: remembering, grieving, rejoicing, celebrating, giving thanks, reliving. The major difference, of course is that in this case the one who died is risen and alive and in our midst. The Supper is a declaration of the life-giving power of his death which we are to continue to proclaim until he returns.

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:25 (TNIV)

² Greek: ‘eucharis’

Sept. 10, 2008

Communion: Now

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”¹

The experience of the Lords Supper is not just a time to reflect on something that happened long ago. Christ is present with us right now in the sacrament. This is why we often refer to it as ‘holy communion’. The risen Christ truly is present with us and we are receiving his life into our lives. It is a special time to commune with Christ in prayer and to allow his Spirit to work in us.

It is also a time to rededicate ourselves to Christ and his service. At the table, weary servants of Christ are refreshed and renewed. We proclaim our faith in Christ as our Saviour and we renew our allegiance to him as our King. Our Lord gives us spiritual food and drink to sustain us on our pilgrimage. In this context he often supplies encouragement, correction, redirection and/or new energy to go back out and build his kingdom in this world that he loves so much. Like the disciples in Emmaus who encountered Christ in the breaking of the bread, this communion with Christ refreshes faith and gives great joy.

And, the Supper is an opportunity for communion with one another. Relationships most frequently grow over shared meals. At the table of our Lord, he calls us to share together and to grow in love and commitment to one another. It is a family feast. It is a time of fellowship right now with the risen Christ and with our sisters and brothers in Jesus.

¹ Acts 2:42 (TNIV)

Sept. 11, 2008

Communion: Future

"I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."¹

The Sacrament is also a foretaste of the coming 'marriage supper of the Lamb'.

At the end, after Christ's return, the resurrection of the dead and the judgements, the new age will begin with a great feast. The Lamb of God will at last be united with his bride, the Church. People of every era, race and nation will be gathered together in this glorious banquet to rejoice in God's new creation and in our eternal life with Him!

The Lord's Supper is a foretaste or foreshadowing of this great future event. It declares to us that the best is yet to come. While at this point we may be pilgrims and strangers on the earth, we have a heavenly hope and an eternal existence waiting for us in the future. The sacrament is an 'appetizer' of what is to come.

The future orientation of the Lord's Supper calls us to anticipate, yearn and labour for Christ's return. It calls us to hope in the midst of a discouraging world. It is also a time to reflect on whether he would find us faithfully doing his will if that return were to occur today². It may even be a call to reflect on whether we have accepted Christ's invitation to join him in his coming kingdom. Have you sent your RSVP to God's wedding feast? Are you in the process of 'dressing' for Christ's coming by 'putting on' righteous deeds? Are we praying for and yearning to see him face to face?

¹ Matthew 26:29 (TNIV)

² See Luke 12:37-40

Sept. 12, 2008 **Discerning the Lord's Body**

“Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.”¹

As with all God's gracious gifts, faith is the key to receiving and experiencing the blessings that the Lord wants to convey to us through the Sacrament. The elements of the Supper are not like a spiritual vitamin pill, conveying grace in and of themselves. Rather, as we hear the Word proclaimed, as we are reminded of the institution of the Sacrament in the passion of Christ and as we reflect on our own lives in relation to God and one another, we have the opportunity to reach out in faith and receive the blessings which God is offering to us through the bread and wine.

This is why Reformed Christians believe that the celebration of the Supper should always be accompanied by the proclamation of the Word and that it should occur in the context of corporate worship. This affords the best opportunity to focus on its significance and to bring some discernment to our relationship with God, as we are commanded to do.

This reflection and discernment does not need to be a deep, intellectual or theological exercise. Young children may understand much of the significance of the Sacrament and grow in their understanding as they participate. Indeed, if adults think we've 'got it' we probably need to repent of our presumption and approach the mystery of the Lord's Table with childlike faith and wonder.

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:28-29 (TNIV)