
On The Way

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**The Vision That Has Formed the
United Church of Christ
Shifting Vision**

Authority and Accountability

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Baptism
Sacrament of Christian Vocation

The Eucharist
Sacrament of Discipleship

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The Eucharist

Sacrament of Discipleship

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IF BAPTISM CAN be understood as the Sacrament of Vocation, or calling, the Lord's Supper (Eucharist) can be understood as the Sacrament of Discipleship. In this presentation we want to see how these two sacraments have a new and meaningful coherence or unity when viewed in this way.

For those acquainted with Reformation history, the mere mention of the Eucharist (Lord's Supper) brings to mind the heated debates over its meaning and the resultant divisions, many of which are not yet healed. On the other hand, North American Christians generally, who are unaware of these debates, often tend to be quite casual and indifferent about this sacrament. Even in those church bodies where the sacramental accent has been customary, there is alarming ignorance and misunderstanding concerning the Eucharist. On the popular level regard for the Sacrament ranges from pure superstition to culti-fad to complete neglect.

I

It is scarcely necessary to review the detailed history of this sacrament in the United Church of Christ as it relates to the Reformation roots in the teachings of Luther, Calvin and Zwingli. At the same time, it is important to recognize other strains of teaching that have fashioned the diverse understandings and attitudes among us today. That diversity is not new, of course. It was prevalent already in eighteenth-century England to the extent that William Pitt, Prime Minister in 1772, said on one occasion to the Parliament in exasperation: "We have a Calvinistic creed, a Popish liturgy, and an Arminian clergy."

The fact is that, although the Lutheran and Reformed differences over the Lord's Supper were firmly fixed on the continent of Europe, it was in England that the Puritan Reformation and the Wesleyan revivals of the eighteenth century introduced even more differences in the understanding of this sacrament. American Christianity inherited that strain of Anglo-Saxon diversity, and then added its own brands! We can identify three stages of development in the general attitude toward the Lord's Supper.

First, the place of the Supper in New England Puritanism: in Old

England, the Reformation cry of "justification by faith only" had led to the Puritan rejection of all ritual marks of the Church. In place of these the Puritans insisted on individual, personal evidence of the spiritual regeneration that only the Word and Spirit could bring about. That evidence, a recounting of the experience of regeneration, had to satisfy the community of faith. Since most Puritans had been baptized as infants in the Church of England, that experience became the gateway to participation in the Lord's Supper.

As these Puritans migrated to New England, their insistence upon the evidence of regeneration was intensified, chiefly because many newcomers to Massachusetts Bay colony and other colonizing points were not all of that persuasion. They became members of the church by "owning the covenant" but they were barred from the Lord's Supper until acceptable evidence of regeneration was given. However, the experience of regeneration was often an elusive goal, and thus many were barred from the Table. The Supper became the private experience of the spiritually elite. The dilemma arose as the next generation was born. Could children be baptized who were born to parents who had owned the covenant but who had not been admitted to the Lord's Table? The response was to provide a way around a requirement that was self-defeating for the church: the establishment of what came to be known as the "Half-way Covenant" which permitted the baptism of children of non-communing members of the church.

There were years of agonizing debate over this, for the Puritans faced the classic dilemma of how to keep the church pure at its innermost core while seeking to fulfill Christ's command to baptize and bring people into the church. The result of the Half-Way Covenant was to have a majority of church members who never communed at the Lord's Table. This tended to undercut the very concern of those who sought to protect the Table: it led to a lessening of regard for the Sacrament.

This experience of the New England Puritans illustrates the dangerous misuse of ecclesiastical authority, whether that authority is exercised by the clergy or by the laity. Again and again through Christian history, the Lord's Supper has been used to exclude persons from the fellowship of faith. Each effort of that kind had its beginning in times of social and moral deterioration. They were efforts to bring order out of chaos, but they often became the means of establishing human dominion in the Church and thus supplanting the Lordship of Christ. The history of eucharistic practice (or the practice of the Lord's Supper) in the past twenty centuries, is interwoven with this human error.

The second stage in the development of American Christian attitudes toward the Lord's Supper was in large part a reaction to the Puritan dilemma. A church filled with "half-way Christians" was bound to be filled with frustration, but even more, with unfilled spiritual need and hunger. This expressed itself in the First Great Awakening (1735-1750)

in New England. At that time hundreds of church members for the first time had an experience of spiritual regeneration. Two results are to be noted here.

First, the authority of personal religious experience was validated for many people. Second, it convinced many persons that the sacraments, both Baptism and the Lord's Supper, were *experientially* important—not merely important ways for the church to put its seal of approval upon a person's faith. Adult or believer's baptism, as we have previously noted, became more acceptable and gave impetus to the spread of the Baptist movement in American churches. But equally important was the experiential emphasis in the Lord's Supper. No longer was it simply a seal of saving faith. Rather it became an experience of communion with the Lord. This inward emphasis was to have immense influence in all American churches, particularly of Anglo-Saxon background. And, as we have noted earlier, it was accentuated in the Second Great Awakening as the nineteenth century dawned.

The third stage in the shifting attitudes of the American churches toward the Lord's Supper is marked by a slow but steady erosion of all substantive sacramental understanding of this Christian rite. The focus on individual experience was a major cause of the erosion. But another was the dominant accent on preaching as the central act in corporate worship. The late nineteenth century became the era of the "Pulpit Princes" in Protestant churches. The pulpit succeeded in eliminating the communion table. Generations of North American Christians grew up without any sense of sacramental life. The Lord's Supper became a relic of religious piety of little importance to those who thought of faith in terms of intellectual satisfaction.

An illustration of this trend may be seen in the Christian Church movement which became a part of the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches in 1931. Although portions of this movement originated in the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century (which accentuated the experiential aspect of the Sacrament), of equal significance are the roots of the Christian Church movement in the anti-ecclesiastical, anti-clerical attitudes of the Enlightenment. Christian churches, drawn from Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian groups, represented the Enlightenment thought of John Locke who placed the authority of individual understanding as supreme in all of life, including faith. Rational belief was confidence in one's own interpretation of the faith and of its sources in the Scriptures. Thus all ecclesiastical traditions were suspect: clergy, rituals, creeds, and sacraments. Preaching that reached out to the autonomous reason of human minds was the chief reason for the church.

Parallel to these developments, and at many points interwoven with them, were changing perceptions of the Lord's Supper among those de-

nominations whose members had come from the continent of Europe; chiefly Lutheran and Reformed. Among them, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, were the German Evangelicals and a second wave of German Reformed people.

The early Lutheran and Reformed groups, arriving in the first decades of the eighteenth century long before the Revolution, were greatly affected by both of the Awakenings. In the resulting turmoil in the German Reformed churches, the Mercersburg Movement was born. That movement, under John Williamson Nevin and Philip Schaff, strongly resisted the reduction of the Lord's Supper to personal religious experience. The Mercersburg emphasis was upon the Lord's Supper as the *corporate* act of God's people in celebration of Christ's mystical presence at the Table. In that act, the Church shows itself as the extension of the incarnate Christ's presence in the world. The influence of this sacramental emphasis can be traced in the "Order for Holy Communion" in the old Evangelical and Reformed *Book of Worship* (1947), and in the UCC *Services of Word and Sacrament* (published in 1964, and again in 1967 and 1971).

Among the later immigration of German Reformed and German Evangelical people, the chief formative influence concerning the Lord's Supper was nineteenth-century German pietism, on the one hand, and German rationalism on the other hand. Pietism was a reaction to rationalistic tendencies; but the freedom of thought and independence of mind generated by rationalism gave impetus to pietism's independent spirit. This is particularly noticeable among the German Evangelical people who migrated to the Ohio valley and the Midwest in the 1840s and 1850s.

Although issuing from the government-sponsored union of Lutheran and Reformed churches in Prussia in 1817, the German Evangelicals in America tended to be more Lutheran than Reformed in thought and practice. This was largely due to the fact that the majority of German Evangelicals came from parts of Germany dominated by Lutheranism. At the same time, it was the pietistic thought and practice of the time that shaped their attitudes toward the Lord's Supper. The accent fell heavily (as Luther himself emphasized), upon the Sacrament as a means of grace by which the forgiveness of sins was *effected* in the participant. It was not simply a sign and seal confirming forgiveness through faith, but an effecting of forgiveness in the believer. As an act of piety (devotion), participation in the Supper was obedience to the Lord. And in that obedience the forgiveness of sins was sealed. Thus it was a highly personal and individual matter, not primarily a corporate act. In this respect, it was somewhat akin to the experiential emphasis of the churches of Anglo-Saxon background, shaped in Puritan piety.

Because of this emphasis upon the Supper as a sacrament of forgiveness, both the German Reformed and the German Evangelicals of the late nineteenth century stressed the role of preparation for communion, either

through a corporate preparatory service, or through corporate confession. Communion was therefore reserved for special occasions and became a very solemn experience in the life of a congregation.

When the Evangelical and Reformed Church was formed (in 1934), there was an attempt to bring together the diverse emphases resulting from the early and late German immigration periods, and from the North American religious experience. This was done in the publication of the Evangelical and Reformed *Book of Worship* in 1941 and again in 1947, as we have noted, in which the unifying accents were derived from the Mercersburg Movement of a century earlier. While the "Order for Holy Communion" therein was widely used, it is difficult to determine its influence on popular understandings of the Sacrament.

While the foregoing historical survey gives some understanding of current attitudes toward the Lord's Supper, we can only admit that the range of belief and practice in United Church of Christ congregations today defies clear categorization. My own reading of this is that there is much ignorance, much misunderstanding—but also *much hunger for understanding*.

Experimental efforts to attract people to participate in the Lord's Supper have contributed to more misunderstanding. The churches themselves, not only the clergy, live under the illusion that if something is more attractive, or different, it will be "marketable." The "marketing" mentality has done immeasurable harm to the Church's proclamation of the faith. In general, the prevailing attitude toward the Supper is that it is one of the elective elements among the traditional activities of the Church. That attitude reflects almost total ignorance not only of the Sacrament itself but also of what we mean by the word "Church." It is also ignorance of the Christian faith.

II

How, then, should the Church respond to the situation? I propose a two-step process. First, it is of the utmost importance to take into account what has happened in ecumenical studies (as we did in reference to baptism) and, second, it is equally important to develop the meaning of the perspective on the Lord's Supper suggested in the phrase: the *Sacrament of Discipleship*.

It is unfortunate that many church members, and in this the clergy must accept responsibility, have very little awareness of the results of the ecumenical studies on the sacraments done since 1930 under the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. I suspect that Protestants are more aware of changes in the liturgical life of the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II, especially the shift from Latin to English in the liturgy. There is, we must admit, something ironic in that.

Ecumenical agreement about the Lord's Supper has actually been a

monumental achievement, despite the tendency of the public media to highlight continuing differences. It is often overlooked that differences in particular accents and practices do not destroy the common agreement as to the central importance of this sacrament to the Christian faith. Common understandings grow from commitment to this crucial importance. Different practices are recognized as the products of different cultural and social conditions and are therefore not real barriers to Christian unity. The recent accord reached in the Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue illustrates this.

The common accord reached about the meaning of the Lord's Supper will do much to correct the erroneous understandings of popular religious piety. Some of them, because of the narrow and limited perspectives of our churches, will seem almost foreign and strange. But they are all rooted in the New Testament and in the mainstream of the Christian tradition. Let us note them.

First, the Supper is a *eucharist*, a service of thanksgiving. "Our Lord Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, took bread and gave thanks." In acting thus, Jesus did what his people had done from time immemorial when they gathered to eat. Thanksgiving to God was the mood at the table, even the reason for eating. Christians through the ages have understood the entire Supper itself as a thanksgiving to God, for it is always done in response to Christ's word: "This do in remembrance of me." Such obedient response is a thanksgiving to God. Unfortunately, this joyous eucharistic note has been lost in many of our churches. The solemnity of the forgiveness of sins seemed to leave little room for joy for those who were of the pietistic traditions. One would think quite to the contrary. Should not forgiveness express itself in joyous thanksgiving?

Second, the Supper is an act of *the community of memory*. It is not simply a time of quiet recollection, but of active representation of the story symbolized in the Supper. The Greek word here is *anamnesis*. It means "to recall" by participation in Christ's life, death, and resurrection. At the Eucharist, the Church is acting out its reality as a community of memory. In its rehearsal, at the Eucharist, of the central point of the Gospel, the community of memory continually corrects itself and refines its perceptions of the meaning of Christ's act for all humankind. It is thus accountable to the Christ and to all who are His.

Third, the Supper is an *invocation of the Spirit*. The Greek word is *epiklesis*. It is the prayer in which we call upon the Spirit for those gifts that enable us to live the life Christ calls us to share. The Supper is, according to Christian doctrine, dependent upon the gift of the Spirit for the effectual communication of God's grace, making possible our communion with Christ. To pray for the Spirit moves us out of self-concern and private seeking of blessings to a concern for others. Thus we know the "unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace."

Fourth, the Supper is *communion with Christ*. It is the Lord's Table

to which we come, not ours. He is the host; He has invited us, nay, commanded us. Communion, then, is not simply a matter of partaking the elements. It is responding to Christ's presence. Here is the real presence of Christ: in the promise to be with those who call upon Him. Such communion is of the very essence of life. Communion with one another is possible because of His communion with us as He has promised. The elements used in the Supper are important for this communion with Christ. For the Christ at the Table is not any Christ of our imaginations. He is the Christ whose body was broken for us, whose life was poured out for us, and who rose to live with us. And it is this Christ who by His presence assures us of forgiveness and new life.

Accentuating these meanings of the Supper is a first step in helping church members in our time know the sacramental nature of the Holy Communion. A second step, however, is necessary in order for the Church to be the Church in times like these.

The Supper must be understood as the *Sacrament of Discipleship*. Ecumenical studies have enabled Protestants world-wide to recover an understanding of the place of the Eucharist in the life of the Church. Only a few of the monastic orders have held tenaciously to the understanding that in the eucharistic celebration Christians know themselves as God's mission in the world. To recapture this sense is to understand anew the meaning of discipleship. It is at the Lord's Table that His disciples gather to know anew the dimensions of the relationship they have with Him, sharing His suffering and victory, knowing themselves as servants of His reconciling work among all people. The Faith and Order Commission document states it in this way:

Reconciled in the Eucharist, the members of the body of Christ are called to be servants of reconciliation and witnesses of the joy of the resurrection. Their very presence in the world requires their solidarity with all people in their sufferings and hopes, to whom they can be signs of the love of Christ who sacrificed himself for all humankind on the Cross and gives himself in the Eucharist.¹

Although that statement does not employ the word "discipleship," it is the appropriate way to speak of the pattern of life required of "servants of reconciliation." This is certainly made clear in Paul's great discussion of our ministry in II Corinthians 4 and 5.² Discipleship is sharing the life of Christ; it is "joining him in his passion and victory." "Discipleship" consists of being *called* (baptism) and of being *sent*. Here again we are underlining a neglected aspect of the nature of the gathering for the Eucharist. Benefits, as Luther always emphasized, for the believer are important. But it is important also to know that our Lord gathered *his disciples* at the Last Supper, and so he does in all succeeding Suppers. It is the *disciples* of Christ who can give thanks for the opportunity to learn again what it is to follow Christ, and to be sent by Him.

The use of this accent on discipleship in the celebration of the Lord's Supper is long overdue. It is the essential corollary of Baptism as the Sacrament of Vocation. Called to discipleship needs to be impressed upon every heart; imbedded in the spirit of every Christian. Only in this way can the Church be pulled out of its persistent tendency to encourage only self-serving, exclusivistic religious activities among its members. Only then can those who hear the call turn around from their hopeless journeys to "seek first the Kingdom."

This accent has the potential of turning us again to some of the profound teachings of the Church concerning the real nature of repentance, conversion, and sanctification—all of which are essential to the recovery of a strong moral fiber in our personal and social existence. Words like repentance, conversion and sanctification have been lost from our vocabulary. It is striking that so many modern prayers of "confession" include no reference to repentance—sorrow for sin and a decision to "turn around." Discipleship is learning that obedience to Christ requires continual repentance, a turning from other lords, and thus a continual process of conversion.³ Discipleship is thus a fulfilling of our sanctification—our cleansing under the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a turning again and again to our calling in our baptism. That is what the eucharistic celebration does: it returns us to our baptism and unites again with the Christ in obedience.

There is a repeated call for spiritual renewal among the churches. No one denies the importance of this. But spiritual renewal is not a goal to be achieved; it is a gift of the Spirit as we fulfill our baptism (calling) first at the Table of our Lord in eucharistic celebration, and then in the service of reconciliation which He has demonstrated. It is in the Sacrament of Discipleship that spiritual renewal is defined and experienced.

NOTES

¹ *One Baptism, One Eucharist, and a Mutually Recognized Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 73, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1975, p. 23.

² Cf. II Cor. 5:16-21 and Mark 8:34-37.

³ Cf. David Steinmetz, "Reformation and Conversion," in *Theology Today*, 15:1, pp. 25-32, April 1978.