

1 Corinthians 11:17-34
July 5, 2009

South Plains

The Crisis of the Lord's Supper

Singing the Star Spangled Banner and watching those Fourth of July fireworks reminds us of times of crisis. The "rockets red glare" was burned into the memory of Francis Scott Keyes. The flag raised over Iwo Jima has come to symbolize the courage and determination of the United States in achieving victory in World War II. Independence Day celebrates one crisis after another overcome in the history of this country.

In a similar way, the Lord's Supper celebrates the primary crisis in the history of Christianity: the death of Christ himself. Of course this sacrament means much more – the presence of the risen Christ, fellowship with God and with each other, God's promise to nourish the church, Jesus' words at the end of Matthew's gospel: "I am with you always." Since we are approaching the 500th birthday of John Calvin this week, I want to recall Calvin's role in two other crises around the Lord's Supper.

Both Martin Luther and John Calvin were thoroughly disgusted with the way the medieval Roman Catholic Church celebrated the Mass. Yet both men were adamant about the central place this sacrament should have in the life of the church. We can see why when we look at the first crisis of the Lord's Supper

described in 1 Corinthians, chapter 11. Paul is writing this part of his letter to fix a problem among the Corinthian Christians. Their factions and backbiting and divisiveness had taken root in their worship. Their worship typically included a potluck meal together. This potluck was finished by a celebration of the Lord's Supper. They had somewhat the same problem we have at South Plains for meals. Since they met in a home, not in a fellowship hall, some people could sit in the dining room, and others had to eat standing up in the hallway or courtyard. As we know, this is not a terrible problem. But suppose the session of South Plains always got to sit in chairs at the tables while the rest of the congregation stood up. Now imagine that the session picks up a gourmet meal from the Outback Steak House to bring to the potluck while the rest of the congregation brings crackers and coke from the gas station. Let your imagination run further: the session brings beer and some get drunk while most of the church is going hungry. Now you have a picture of the situation in Corinth. Prominent people are more than well-fed while ordinary Christians eagerly wait for the sacrament bread to be passed because they are hungry.

This is what Paul means when he warns the good people of Corinth that "whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord (11:27)."

Corinthians Christians showed "contempt for the church of God and humiliated those who have nothing

(11:22).” It was as if the death of Jesus Christ changed nothing about their behavior toward each other. The irony is that one of the reasons we take communion so seriously is because the Corinthians took it so casually. Because Paul wrote to correct their abuse, we benefit by understanding the sacrament so much better. That was the first crisis in the Lord’s Supper. Calvin understood 1 Corinthians 11 as a wake-up call to the church to appreciate the centrality of the Supper.

The second crisis was the Reformation. After Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenburg Church, the church changed forever. Protestants of all stripes changed and the Roman Catholic Church itself eventually changed. One major change for Protestants was in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

No longer would the priest turn his back on the people to mumble Latin. No longer would the people be limited only to the bread, and that typically only once a year. No longer would the Protestant churches restrict leadership in the sacrament to priests ordained by bishops and blessed by the Pope. No longer would there be that magical moment when bread becomes the flesh of Jesus and wine his blood.

Despite these massive changes, Calvin defined the marks of the true church as wherever the word of God was rightly preached and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper were rightly administered. And he

believed to the end of his life that the church should celebrate the Supper every Sunday.

Why? Because he believed that communion and baptism represent the promises of the gospel, salvation and life eternal. Since we are baptized only one time, and ordinarily as an infant, communion was the sacrament that tangibly and regularly presents the promises of God to believers. Calvin was a practical man. Preaching the word of God was important because that’s God’s way of communicating with us. But the sacraments are just as important because they bring the promises to our senses of taste, and touch and sight and smell. We participate fully and bodily in the sacraments. He even calls them “exercises” because we actively confirm our trust in God’s promises especially by coming to the table.

I certainly would not want to argue that weekly communion is necessary. But, when I was growing up, communion was quarterly so that if we missed that Sunday, it would be six months between participation in the Lord’s Supper. As I studied the New Testament and learned how regularly the early Christians broke bread together, I realized that my experience as a child was out of sync with scripture. Because I had not practiced coming to the Lord’s Table, it was more difficult for me to grasp its significance and to benefit from its blessings.

Too often I fear this sacrament becomes what it was to the medieval Catholics, a ritual: important

because it is solemn and quiet, but more to be endured instead of enjoyed and celebrated. This was brought home to me when a Presbyterian elder once suggested that we skip communion one month because there would be too many people in worship. He thought it would be too much trouble to do one of the things that defines the church as a church of Jesus Christ.

There are three reasons why communion is necessary. First, Jesus commanded it. He did not say, "You might want to consider eating this bread and drinking this cup because some people think it's neat." He said, "Do this in remembrance of me." Jesus instituted the supper; and we call it "The Lord's Supper" because he sits at the head of the table and we are his guests.

Second, the bread and the cup remind us of the body and blood of Christ. They are signs of a body that was broken on the cross when the kingdom of God threatened the rulers of the world. They are tokens of blood that was shed so that we might enjoy the life of that kingdom. Whatever it is that we value about Christian faith, we need to remember that faith is alive today because Jesus not only died, but rose from death to lead the way to abundant life.

Third, communion celebrates the presence of Christ with us today. That's the grain of truth that the old church was trying to preserve and almost lost sight of. When we gather around this table we are gathering

around the risen Lord Jesus who shares this meal with us. We don't see him, but we have the promise of his presence. That promise is captured in the double meaning of the words "This is my body." The bread symbolizes his body. More than a symbol, however, is the presence of Christ in the lives of those all around us. The body of Christ is also the church, the people gathered in Christ's name. When we celebrate communion we celebrate relationships, a relationship of love and trust with God and relationships with each other.

Behold the body of Christ!