

WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH XXIX: 3-4

(Reading: Acts 2:42-47; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34)

Where The Lord's Supper Is

When we look back at a previous time in history it's easy to jump to the wrong conclusions about what it was like then. This is part of the baggage we get with evolutionary theory. Since many believe that we have progressed so much since our forefathers, to them what happened centuries ago was really quite primitive compared with what we know now.

This has crept into our church history also. Because the Reformers used a certain type of language and lived in a particular social context we could think, without really thinking, that it wasn't as enlightened as it is now.

One area we can see this is the place of the clergy in the church. For while these "progressives" would say that it's true the Reformers brought out the Scriptural teaching that everyone has a calling from God, not just the clergy as the medieval church had taught, yet, they say, the Reformers didn't go far enough. According to them, the Reformers still reserved a special place for the clergy.

They point to such an article as our text - Article 3 of the Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 29 - for one example of this. They say that reserving the preaching of God's Word, the administration of the sacraments, and the imparting of the blessing, for ministers, is failing to see that others too have these gifts. They claim that there are no directions in scripture as to who should administer the sacraments and that preaching was open to all who were gifted to preach. It all sounds very appealing. Especially when they say that it must be done in good order, and so it's under the supervision of the session of the church.

Doesn't quite sound right, though, does it? Did you see the contradiction? While they make the appeal for a giftedness shared amongst the whole church it must yet be directed and focused through the eldership of the church.

Now, the Reformed-Presbyterian churches have always allowed for gifted lay preachers. But it is only a gift for a few. Not many have this given to them, and so the sessions have quite wisely been careful to make sure a man had this gift.

Ah, that's another qualification, isn't it? It has to be a man. For these progressives, while arguing for everyone being able to play a part in the worship service, fail to note the command to women to be quiet in the church. They are so intent upon turning the church into some kind of modern democratic institution they forget it's actually theocratic.

The Sacrament is what We have Together

When Article 3 speaks about the Lord Jesus appointing His ministers, it's speaking about the church as a whole. For it's the Head of the Body who is directing the parts of the Body. In fact, this Article 3 can be summed up with the words, **THE SACRAMENT IS WHAT WE HAVE TOGETHER**. This is our first point.

You see, what we should notice is that Article 3 is very much about the congregation. It specifies what is given to the people when they're together, and what is not given to those who aren't there. The minister of God's Word and sacraments has no calling outside of the church.

What we read in Acts clearly illustrates this. Right from Acts 2 where in verse 42 the believers dedicate themselves to the apostles' teaching and the breaking of bread, through to chapter 20 where verse 7 records Paul breaking bread with the saints and preaching to them, the pattern is clear. It is clear there is a distinct ministry of the Word and the sacraments within the fellowship. That becomes even clearer when we turn to the different letters of the apostles - whether Paul, Peter, or John. One example is where Paul exhorts Timothy about this in his first letter to him, chapter 4. He tells him there in verse 13, "devote yourself to the public reading of scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you."

We see that ministers are those specially gifted from among God's people who are under the supervision of the leaders of God's people and who only fulfil their calling when they minister to God's people. It's quite simple really.

And that's the same for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Article 3 speaks of blessing the elements of bread and wine. Nothing fancy – in fact, it's something that we would otherwise say is quite plain. These are just the basics. It's nothing as ornate as the parties this world has!

And yet which better way could the Lord have for showing us what really counts for our spiritual lives? Eating and drinking are the two fundamental sources of nourishment.

But back to the congregation. Because where in Reformed-Presbyterian churches do we find people during the Lord's Supper celebration? Why - they are often around a table. They join there equal in every way with their fellow believers. As Rowland Ward notes, "The table at which the disciples reclined with our Lord is an outward aspect of communion which ought not to be disregarded when considering its spiritual nature."

This is indicated by what we find in the Gospels about the Lord's Supper. Jesus said of the cup in Luke 22 verse 17, "Take this and divide it among you." And in Mark 14 verse 23 it says that they all drank from it. The same goes for the bread. It was shared among them. Matthew 26 verse 26 tells us of Jesus breaking the bread and giving it to His disciples.

Over the years there has been much debate and research done about the mode of the Lord's Supper. A lot of effort has gone into finding out the exact biblical way of doing it. Do you have a common cup or the little glasses? And if you use the common cup do you use one for the whole congregation or are there three or four getting passed around?

The principle that has come out of all this is that all these outward debates take away the attention from what really matters - the inside! It's what the bread and wine represents that counts! It symbolises the body of the Lord broken for us and the blood of the Lord poured out for us.

Now, it is quite clear that it was fermented wine which was used at the first supper. And the bread would have been unleavened, because it was the Passover. The wine was poured out from the one container and the bread came from the one loaf. They both came from the one source.

But while it's important to keep these in mind, it's not these that really matter. You do! That's why Article 3 ends the way it does, because you cannot properly receive these elements unless you honestly want to be there.

The Sacrament is Never on its Own

That's why Article 4 follows on the way it does. Because **THE SACRAMENT IS WHAT WE HAVE TOGETHER** we see in the second place, **THE SACRAMENT IS NEVER ON ITS OWN.**

There are two parts to this Article. They both deny any aloneness in connection with this sacrament.

The first part is about the tradition of receiving the sacrament alone. You see, at the time of the Reformation there was much corruption in the church, so much so that those who were rich enough had their own private clergy. Any time they felt like it they could have communion given to them in their own homes.

This is obviously against being part of the congregation of Christ. It's the same kind of attitude Paul condemns the Corinthians for when they went ahead and ate and drank without waiting for anyone else. In verse 22 of chapter 11, in 1st Corinthians, he says it all in a nutshell when he asks them if they aren't despising the church of God and humiliating those who have nothing? Because this was indeed what was being done by the church at the time of the Reformation.

The second part kept the cup alone. The tradition developed that while the bread could be given out in the form of wafers, only the priest could drink the wine. So the congregation only got half the benefits! And the priest got the lot!

Historically this practice was officially adopted by the Council of Constance in 1415. It is clearly another example of a church quite off the rails! This was particularly so as for the first twelve hundred years after Christ communion of both bread and wine were given.

One reason given for this tradition is that someone might spill a drop. That's consistent with the Roman Catholic view that it is the literal blood of Christ. Other reasons are that the body of Christ is contained complete in either the bread or the wine and that the priest drinks the wine on behalf of the people.

So while we see consistent Roman Catholic theology here, it is all far from the words of scripture. We have already heard what Jesus said in the gospels about his disciples eating and drinking the elements. Paul further quotes the Lord in 1st Corinthians 11 verse 26: "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

And earlier on, in chapter 10 verse 16, he had said, "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?"

It's interesting that the Second Vatican Council, after five hundred years, decided that the cup could be shared with the laity. And why? Was it because they went back to the Word? Actually, in the light of increasing pressure from laity Pope Pius XII in 1943 'recovered' a very ancient understanding of the sacraments. It was his 'enlightened' letter to the church that formed the basis for the change at Vatican II.

So they still miss the point: The sacrament only finds its true purpose and blessing within the congregation of Christ. It is when we come together in spirit and in truth that this visible sermon confirms the spoken Word.

Roman Catholic theology has meant that anything physical associated with the sacrament is in itself regarded as holy. Just like they have made Mary the mother of our Lord immaculately conceived because she bore the Christ-child, so all that carries, holds, or otherwise conveys the elements take on that magical quality. They even have a word for these things - sacramentals. We have already seen that their members are told they need to genuflect or kneel as they come into the church because of the presence of these things. Article 4 gives us a brief description of what these things are in connection with this sacrament. Turning to a Roman Catholic High School instruction book you'll find it's quite a list! They are objects such as candles, holy water, icons, statues, incense, relics, pictures, church buildings, rosary, and priest's vestments.

Jesus actually spoke quite clearly against such things. One example is when he was speaking with the Samaritan woman in John 4. You might remember that story. Jesus had struck a bit too close to home for that quite immoral woman. So she had quickly changed the subject by turning to worship and to justifying how the way they worshipped and where they worshipped was the right way. She tried to establish her mountain as a holy place. She tried to reduce the grace of God to a quasi-material force to be linked to water or stones or bits of human hair. That's why Jesus said to her in verse 24, "God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth."

We must see that any superstition is contrary to the nature of this sacrament. It's not what Christ made it to be. For it is amongst His people that this sacrament must be. In His words in Matthew 18 verse 20, it is where two or three are together in His name that He is with them.

This is why the sacrament is always found together with the preaching of God's Word and the practice of church discipline. They are all together the marks of a true church.

This doesn't mean, though, that it can only happen in a church building. Wherever God's people are called together by the eldership for public worship, there the sacrament may be administered. This is why we may have it occasionally for the very sick. Then it is a gathering together with them.

Actually, then, by gathering together with that person, we show clearly how **THE SACRAMENT IS NEVER ON ITS OWN. Indeed, then THE SACRAMENT IS WHAT WE HAVE TOGETHER.**