

Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ One Bread. One Cup. One Body.

Lyle McKenzie writes his church...

Grace be yours and peace.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. —1 Corinthians 11:26 (NRSV)

A LOAF OF BREAD AND A CUP OF WINE

This letter expresses my heart-felt plea that in communities of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, once again and wherever possible, we lift up these central symbols of bread and cup and offer these alone in our celebrating the Lord's Supper.

I hope that through the encouragement of these *Birthright Letters* more and more communities of the ELCIC are joining in every-Sunday celebrations of the Eucharist, and that at every celebration, it is one bread and one cup that we are sharing. My fear is that in many of these celebrations, including the one in the community I serve, we reduce and divide the rich Biblical symbols of a loaf of bread and cup of wine. We reduce and divide the body and blood of Christ, truly present *for you* and in our communion with one another, into individual pre-prepared hosts and glasses; into gluten-free bread and drams of grape juice. We reduce and divide until, in the most unfortunate of circumstances, the Holy Communion of Jesus' followers becomes a *smorgasbord*, with individuals partaking of various options according to personal preferences and needs.

Despite past and recent fears and pressure to do otherwise, here are some of the reasons I believe we need to hold to—and, where we haven't, to return to—the historic and authentic practice of sharing the Eucharist with a loaf of bread and cup of wine alone.

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS "IT'S JUST AS GOOD AS THE REAL THING"

In his Lectures on Genesis, (*Luther's Works*, vol. 2), Martin Luther wrote:

“Just as the bread is made out of many grains ground and mixed together, and out of the bodies of many grains there comes the body of one bread, in which each grain loses its form and body and takes upon itself the common body of the bread; and just as the drops of wine, in losing their own form, become the body of one common wine and drink—so it is and should be with us, if we use this sacrament properly. Christ with all saints, by his love, takes upon himself our form, fights with us against sin, death and all evil. This enkindles in us such love that we take on his form, rely upon his righteousness, life and blessedness. And through the interchange of

his blessings and our misfortunes, we become one loaf, one bread, one body, one drink, and have all things in common.”

I intend this not as a proof text. Luther and the other reformers’ debates about the sacrament were that it be offered in *both kinds* to all and that the real presence of Christ was a mystery that we trust. They were not concerned with the matters of individual glasses or hosts, nor about gluten-free breads or grape juice. But in these words Luther expresses beautifully the rich symbolism of the loaf of bread and the cup. The real presence of Christ and our trusting in faith Jesus’ words, “this is my body, this is my blood,” are not in question. Only that when we share the Eucharist in ways other than as a loaf of bread broken and shared and the cup of wine from which all drink, the original symbols are lessened and some of their meaning lost to us. I have never heard anyone claim that individual wafers or glasses are stronger symbols of our Holy Communion with Christ and one another. They represent a compromise for other reasons. We can debate the history and current reasons given for the compromise, but we have to admit it is a compromise just the same. The question becomes “Is the compromise worth what is lost in our being faithful to the original symbols as Jesus instituted them?” The fears are real but the reality is less frightening.

Despite various studies through the years, some of the questions around the potential transmission of disease via the common cup, remain unanswered. No one can claim there is *no* risk. But much of the information suggests the risk is low, and likely lower than in other ways we are routinely in contact with people, including shaking hands. The recent SARS outbreak brought all forms of contact associated with worship into question. And yet many communities continued their practices as before because to stop greeting one another, to not share the peace of Christ, to be kept from communing with God and one another was too much to lose. Is not the same true of our communion practice?

Other modes of sharing the elements, including individual cups or wafers are not necessarily more hygienic. We can retain the practice of sharing from a loaf of bread and a common cup and do much to minimize the risk and to help to address people’s fears. All ministers preparing, presiding and assisting at our Holy Communion should thoroughly wash their hands with soap and water just prior to handling the elements. A precious-metal chalice, a wine with greater alcohol content, the careful wiping and turning of the cup between communicants should be common practice. Finally the long history of common cup usage may be our best assurance that the risk to health is very low. Indeed, far greater than any risk, is our need for and the benefits of this gift of grace.

REAL PRESENCE, UN-REAL PRACTICE.

Part of what we lose when we move to more individual forms of distribution is the integrity of our belief in Christ truly-present “in and under” the bread and wine. How we handle the elements before, during and after our celebrations of the Eucharist witness to what we believe. Disposable glasses with residual wine thrown into the garbage are a strong witness against our belief in the mystery that “this is the blood of Christ shed for you.” A trail of crumbs around the table fails at witnessing to this bread being “the body of Christ given for you.” The gifts we share in bread and wine made precious through the word of Christ require our greatest care. The Statement on Sacramental Practices of our Church serves as a helpful guide. One cup (or where necessary, one cup at each station), carefully shared, most faithfully expresses what we believe. The use of wafers may avoid crumbs but too much is lost in their having no connection to bread as we know it and in the unity of one loaf blessed and broken. Instead, one loaf of bread (or again, when necessary, one loaf at each station), carefully prepared so as not to crumb when broken, held on a paten, in a basket or cloth, best expresses what we believe. Moreover, this is also an ecumenical concern. In our full communion with the Anglican Church of Canada, and in our relationships with other Christians, our practice needs to be faithful to what we believe and sensitive to the beliefs of our sisters and brothers in Christ.

THE WRONG THINGS FOR ALL THE RIGHT REASONS

A friend more learned than I, has said that what we are doing when we serve grape juice, alternate breads, and provide multiple options for distribution of the sacrament is “the wrong things for all the right reasons.”

The right reasons are ensuring that all feel included. Those more at risk or who fear they are vulnerable to infection if they drink from the common cup, recovering alcoholics, those with allergies or gluten intolerance are all unable to participate fully if we insist on bread and cup alone. And so we have provided options to substitute for bread and wine. This is a very sensitive discussion. And I acknowledge that as someone who is able to receive both bread and wine, I cannot speak from direct experience of being unable to participate fully in the reception of both elements of Holy Communion. At best, I can share stories of my experiences with others. One is of a woman who came to the university when I was serving as chaplain. She came before the opening service to ask if she was welcome to commune, and if grape juice was available. I expressed that she was indeed welcome at the table. I explained that we did not have grape juice available but that to commune in one kind was to fully share in the sacrament. Her response was simply, “Oh!”

And for four years following that service, she communed most every week, never once indicating to me, even when asked, that she felt excluded. In the parish I now serve, I regularly serve the bread to a person who is gluten-intolerant. She receives the bread and the wine, but gives her partner the bread to consume once they leave the table. She too has indicated she does not want the congregation to change its practice. I am aware of people in many other parishes that commune in only one kind. I have yet to confront a situation where a person is unable to receive either element. All this being said, I believe our overall concern must be our treasuring of the sacrament as it has been “handed on to us” and our welcome to every person who comes to the Lord’s table. What I don’t believe we should do is quickly abandon the symbolism of bread and cup, in favour of offering a range of alternatives, before looking together at whether being and feeling included depends upon receiving the sacrament in both kinds. The multiplication of options has resulted, not so much in serving just those who cannot receive otherwise, but in the practice of people exercising simple preference —with children choosing grape juice instead of wine because they prefer the taste, as an example. In those communities where this practice is already in place, it is especially difficult to consider *going back* to the more original practice. The approach must be made with great care. The sacrament is too great a treasure to us individually and corporately for us to do otherwise. It may require that those for whom the options were first intended, take the lead in a discussion of whether they can still feel included within the more faithful practice of bread and cup alone.

WHY IS THIS MEAL DIFFERENT THAN ALL THE OTHERS?

At the Passover meal a young child is instructed to ask “Why is this night different than all other nights.” The question prompts sharing how the sacred Passover meal, relived again each year, continues to shape Jewish people in their relationship to God up to the present and into the future. Rooted as it is in the same Passover tradition, the sacred Eucharistic meal, begs a similar question from us. “Why is this meal different than all other meals?” The Biblical witness recorded in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 (NRSV) is:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, Do this in remembrance of me.”

Our Confessions further proclaim that this meal “is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and to drink.” (*The Small Catechism, The Sacrament of the Altar, 1-2*). Through the words of Christ, ordinary bread and ordinary wine become for us the body and blood of Christ and “the whole gospel ... [is] embodied” in this blessed sacrament. (*Large Catechism, Sacrament of the Altar, 32*)

And so we eat this meal in a way that is unlike any other meal. A single loaf of bread, blessed, broken and shared, and a single cup of wine, blessed and given to each one to drink, is a different way than we usually eat and drink. And by God’s Spirit we are directed to a different way of living: offering mercy and forgiveness; sharing our bread with all, that all would have enough; living in one Holy Communion in Christ Jesus; and trusting the new life that is ours even now, uniting us beyond all time and space. What a blessed foretaste of the eternal feast to come in Christ Jesus our Lord!

Let it be so among us each and every time we gather around a loaf of bread and a cup of wine in Jesus’ name.

Lyle.



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Additional Resources

There are two significant collections of potentially useful supplemental resources available at Lift Up Your Hearts <<http://www.worship.ca/>>, the worship and spirituality website of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

The first is the lovely series of *Pastoral Essays on the Statement on Sacramental Practices*. They were published in 1992. Several of the essays presage and complement the work done on *Reclaiming Our Birthright*. The series of essays is available in the Sacramental Practices section of the ELCIC Resources & Helps page at Lift Up Your Hearts. The full address is <<http://www.worship.ca/sec3.html#sacprac>>.

A second body of helpful material is that of Paul Bosch’s essays in the Worship Workbench series. Here again, several of the items will prove timely and helpful. Pastor Bosch’s essays appear on a dedicated page at Lift Up Your Hearts. The full address is <<http://www.worship.ca/workbench.html>>. Of the almost-seventy essays in the Workbench collection those which most closely bear on *Birthright* matters are flagged with “Birthright” on the *Worship Workbench* page. See, especially, Essays 26 and 31.