

## Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ In the Beginning

*Paul Bosch writes to the ELCIC community...*

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This series of Pastoral Letters is presented under the title “Reclaiming our Birthright”, with the sub-title “Pastoral Letters on the Every-Sunday Celebration of Holy Communion”. The series is intended to provide background for Christian people as they wrestle in their home parishes with the issues surrounding frequency of communion.

You are perhaps already aware that a world-wide ecumenical consensus has arisen in recent years that is truly unprecedented. (See the volume *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* published in 1982 by the World Council of Churches; see also *Worship Matters* 7 below.) Not since before the Reformation have Christian churches found such unanimous agreement about significant issues for faith. And agreement about issues surrounding worship has been among the most substantial. What is Christian worship? How should we worship in our various denominations and parishes? What is essential in Christian worship and what is of secondary importance? All the Christian churches have been asking themselves these questions. And most significantly, coming up with the same answers.

It is almost certain, for example, that the primitive Christian community celebrated a form of the Holy Communion “as often as every Lord’s Day”, in the years immediately following our Lord’s earthly ministry. 1 Corinthians 11:23 ff. represents probably the earliest witness to the Holy Communion in the Apostolic writings: “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you...”

Acts 20:7 describes an early gathering for worship: “On the first day of the week [Sunday], when we gather to break bread...”. The author uses here the term “break bread” to refer to the Holy Communion, perhaps in a simple “house-church” type of setting. Justin Martyr, an early witness and himself later to die for the infant faith, writes a endearing description of Christian worship in the year 150 A.D. His words are quoted in full on page 6 in *With One Voice*. Apparently the infant Christian community recognized the pattern of gathering weekly around Word-and-Sacrament as organic to its life.

But why communion? What does the celebration of Holy Communion add to a simple Service of prayer and praise and preaching, on a given Sunday? Put another way: What does Sacrament add to Word? I suggest that we enrich our lives in three ways by “reclaiming our birthright” and returning to the practice of the celebration of Holy Communion every Sunday.

1) First, by offering Holy Communion every Lord’s Day, we are simply being more faithful to the command of Christ himself, who said, “Do this for the remembrance of me” (1 Cor. 11:24). In the same passage where Paul quotes Jesus’ words, he also reminds us: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” ( 1 Corinthians 11:26). It is no small matter to remind ourselves that Christ himself enjoins us to repeat this action. The eating and the drinking of this bread and this cup constitute themselves a “proclamation”. That is, to eat and to drink at this Meal is itself a “word”.

2) This brings us to a second good reason to celebrate both Word and Meal every Sunday: We are in this action “proclaiming the Lord’s death”. St. Augustine reminds us that the

Sacraments are “visible words”. Consider these parallels: The Bread, at Holy Communion, is taken into the embrace of God; blessed there; broken as a sign of a suffering that sanctifies, and given out, for the life of the world. The Wine at Holy Communion, in like manner, is taken into the embrace of God; blessed there; poured out in a gesture that recalls sacrifice; and, again, given out, shared with all who are present, for renewal of life.

There is no question that such actions communicate; they “speak” to people. Perhaps we will always need a spoken, verbal Word to interpret, to add nuance and specificity to, the Action of Sacrament. But we are sadly deceived if we assume that human beings express themselves—and communicate to others!—by means of the verbal alone. A spoken word alone will never suffice to reach every human heart. The issue is not unrelated to the communicative power of the so-called non-verbal in all of human life. You have yourself observed situations, I am sure, in which someone’s “actions speak louder than” their words. Perhaps you have seen the poster with the quotation attributed to St. Francis: “Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.”

3) Finally, what does Sacrament add to a simple Service of prayer and praise and preaching? In a single word: Molecules. Matter. Material. “Stuff”. Atoms. In a Service of Holy Communion, we necessarily are handling the “stuff” of this physical, material world: bread, wine, water. It is impossible to conceive of a Service of Holy Communion that does not include a reverent handling of this world’s “molecules”—bread and wine—by Presiding Minister and by the people.

Consider the far-reaching implications of that simple fact. In a Service of Holy Communion, we are reminding ourselves that God’s concern for this world extends “to the molecules”. God’s concern for this world, that is, is not simply to be considered in terms of your doctrines or your theologizings; it is not simply your philosophies of life, or even the attitudes or intentions of your heart that God wants to enter and claim and renew and transform. God’s ultimate concern embraces also your physical being. God wants to rescue and renew your very body, with its cells and tissues. We profess in the Creed, after all, do we not, our hope in “the resurrection of the body”?

More than that: God’s rescue and renewal is intended to extend even to the molecules, the cells and tissues, of this magnificent world, our home. A Service of Holy Communion reminds us—as a simple Service of prayer and praise and preaching can never remind us—that God is concerned about that hole in the ozone; about the destruction or degradation of habitats and species.

And I’d be willing to argue that the promise of faith in a “resurrection of the body” extends even to “the body politic”. God intends to rescue, to renew, even the “body” of our political and social and cultural life. There is a significant justice issue acted out among us at every celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Here is a simple meal where all are fed alike: a morsel of bread, a sip of wine. The rich do not leave with too much; the poor are not sent away empty.

And still more: God has enlisted us—you, me—in that work of rescue and renewal. The sacraments remind you that you have a role to play in God’s plan of salvation: Read the prayers—of the Assisting Minister, a layperson!—at the Offertory in *Lutheran Book of Worship*.

Well, our next Pastoral Letter (*Worship Matters 4*) will address the question, “Why was the Reformation a tragic necessity?” What happened after the formative early years of our faith that distorted the Apostolic witness to the primacy of both Word and Sacrament each Sunday?

Fondly,

Paul.



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