

Author: James Frederick Brown
Series: Pastoral Essays on the Statement on Sacramental Practices
Series Editor: André Lavergne
Issue: Easter 6, 1992

Copyright: © 1992, 1998 Sub-Committee on Worship and the Arts, Parish Life Committee, Eastern Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. This document may be freely reproduced for non-commercial purposes with credit and mention of <http://www.worship.ca/> as the source.

James Frederick Brown is (1998) pastor of Christ Lutheran Church, Waterloo, ON.

SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

The Care and Feeding of Seedlings: Eucharistic Ministry for Children

Baptism, Eucharist and Ritual

"In Baptism, we are incorporated into the body of Christ, the church. In Holy Communion, the church is nourished and strengthened. Therefore we speak of and practice communion of the baptized." (SP 5.8)

"In the Eucharist, Christ gathers, teaches and nourishes the people of God. It is these gathered people of God who celebrate the Eucharist." (SP 6.1)

"Ritual is pure activity, without meaning or goal." *Frits Staal*

"Ritual is transformative." *Victor Turner*

Meaning in Ritual

Our ritual studies class was stymied: we were attempting, in vain, to establish the proper meaning of the unity candle ceremony often added as an embellishment to wedding liturgies.

Some students suggested that the unity candle symbolized the wedding of two individuals (and two shall become one) arguing that the two separate candles used by bride and groom to light the unity candle be extinguished as the third is lighted. Others opined that the unity candle symbolized a new relationship fashioned by two individuals, a relationship unique because of the individuality of the man and woman. To extinguish the separate candles would be to suggest that individuality was lost or compromised in marriage. The synergy argument (the sum is greater than its parts) would also argue for leaving lit the separate candles (and two shall become three!).

If the bride's and groom's respective parents were to light the separate candles, it occurred to many that the meaning of the separate candles and the unity candle accrued with complexity: is the lighted candle symbolic of the gift of life itself? does an extinguished candle, in this instance, signify the death of the child, and his and her rebirth as husband and wife? do two snuffed candles indicate a break in the streaming of two families into the third created by the wedding?

The class also pondered the theological meaning suggested by lighting the separate candles from the altar candles.

Implicit Meaning in the Doing of Ritual

The inanity of our discussion on this topic began to wear on the patience of our professor and, untypically, he called time on this portion of our seminar. However, he made this observation: the meaning of the ritual is not separated from the action of the ritual; in fact, *the meaning of ritual becomes apparent in the doing of it*. He cautioned us against separating meaning and ritual action, and urged us to do the unity candle ceremony a few hundred times, each way, in the hope that the meaning of each permutation would become clear by about the hundredth time!

Although the seminar was effectively scuttled from this point on, I began to see the ritual in which I was most interested—Christian worship—in an entirely new light. Apart from the explicit meaning of our ritual action, *there is also meaning implicit in the doing of a*

ritual. My professor would probably argue that the implicit meaning is the kernel from which the explicit meaning is derived.

The Example of Baptism

His insight, if it is valid, (and for the moment I wish to consider it so), is extremely useful as a tool for doing ritual criticism. Sprinkling water on the head of one who is being baptized, for example, communicates an entirely different meaning from the pouring of handfuls or shellfuls of water. *Sprinkling* is a rarefied version of *pouring* and, consequently, fails to express the idea of *washing*, the fundamental action of the baptismal rite. Similarly, the convention of pouring water over a person's head *perforce* limits one's understanding of Baptism. (Pastor Eric Reble has said that the immersion Baptisms he administered during his years in India made the burying and rising imagery of Paul's description of the mystical union with Christ with the baptized come *alive*.)

The Experience of Holy Communion

What, then, are the principal actions of the Eucharist, and what is communicated in those actions?

For years I have, with tongue-in-cheek, privately referred to Holy Communion as our (Lutheran) *altar call*, especially on Sundays when we sing the hymn *Just As I Am* (thereby echoing Billy Graham's altar call formula). Joking aside, however, our action imitates precisely the action of an altar call. Except on Sundays when we receive the Eucharist cafeteria-style (i.e. at stations in the nave), we go forward to the altar, *in response to the call of faith*.

Secondly, we approach the altar and stand or kneel at the altar *in community*, cheek by jowl with our fellow believers, anticipating to be fed together, in a group. Through this aspect of our actions, we understand that we are not at a table for one; rather, we are part of something bigger than we are; this is a table for many.

Thirdly, when we receive the Holy Meal we are in the *holy space*, the area in the room used only for this climactic part of our Sunday worship celebrations. The space is holy, not because it is central, or higher, or surrounded by a rail, but because it is reserved for one central action. (In friends' homes I visited as a boy, there was often a front parlor closed off by pocket doors or french doors and reserved only for formal visits on Sunday afternoons. Because it was re-served, it was holy space. In the house children and adults were not permitted to use it at other times or for other activities.)

Fourthly, the *respondents are fed with bread and wine which they are told is not bread and wine, but the body of Christ given for them and the blood of Christ shed for them*.

Finally, when they have eaten and drunk, they *pause in meditation* for a few moments and then the spell is broken by their turning and returning to the nave. If one observes this final step from afar, something seems to have happened to the communicants; but it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what it is. There is definitely a difference between how the people approached the holy space and how they leave it. Perhaps the bread and wine/body and blood has changed them somehow.

Children's Experience of Holy Communion

If you were a child and were allowed to participate fully in the ritual action of Holy Communion, what would your movement, your postures, your reception and your return communicate to you?

- That close to the end of the service you walk to the holy space;
- that you are not alone, but rather doing the same as the other members of the church;
- that the bread is bread although the server says that it is Christ's body;
- that the drink is wine although the server says that it is Christ's blood;
- that you pause for a few moments and/or pray after you have received the bread and wine/body and blood;
- that you return to your place with the same people you went forward with;
- that this is different from all the other stuff done at worship;
- that everyone knows what to do;
- that almost everyone seems to do it.

Embracing Children's Experience of Holy Communion

Several years ago, I was privileged to be an adviser to a group of about a dozen children aged 8 to 12 who, because of their involvement in Sunday worship as choristers and as regular presenters of chancel dramas, agitated to be included in the Holy Communion ritual of our congregations. They could not understand the basis for their exclusion from communion when they were meeting twice during the week for study, preparation and rehearsal, and were integral to Sunday worship once a month.

To the credit of the members of our congregation's Worship and Music Committee, they took seriously the request of the children and began studying the Lutheran Church in America's booklet on communion practices. The adults' answer to the children was in providing precommunion instruction. I feel the committee erred in making the instruction a prerequisite for reception. The children *understood the implicit meaning of communion* through watching the adults of the congregation, week after week perhaps about a hundred times!

The Care and Feeding of Seedlings

Instruction in the explicit meaning of the sacraments can enhance and deepen the experience of all who receive them. But at the heart of the ritual, there is an integrity in the very actions we go through, an integrity which is more than adequate in providing a base for the spiritual formation of children.

How can we expect seedlings to grow in faith if we refuse them the nurture of ritual action?

+ + +