

## Justice and Liberation in the Eucharist

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### SUMMARY

The practice of the Eucharist has become so ritualized and privatized that it has lost much of its meaning — meaning which an examination of its original practice can help us recover. To confront death is to witness to and collaborate with the love that raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

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Suppose you are given the freedom of an ancient European city. In a public ceremony, the mayor presents you with a silver key and an illuminated scroll. You are honored and recognized. But the key opens no doors, and the freedoms listed in the scroll no longer give tangible rewards. You will get as many traffic fines, and pay as much in local taxes, as before. Yet the mayor and corporation solemnly insist that the ceremony must give you real benefits -- because the scroll says so. The symbolism has become detached from reality.

Something similar has happened to the Eucharist, whether we call it a sacrament or an ordinance, use wafers or bread and receive it standing, kneeling or sitting. It is not that the rite gives no real freedom, or that affirmations about it should be denied. Rather, the problem is that the actual practice of the Eucharist has become so ritualized, privatized and abstracted from its historical basis and communal beginnings that we are like the deluded mayor and corporation.

We get the words right, and take, bless, break and share, don't we? So all must be well. Or is it? "Do this in remembrance of me." What is the "this" we are asked to do?

I believe that the "this" is four-dimensional. A two-dimensional communion service has the right words and actions -- bread and wine are shared and eaten. A four-dimensional Eucharist includes a sharing community moving toward justice. The extra dimensions are not optional, but lie at the heart of the original rite. Examining the original practice may help us recover these two missing dimensions.

*The Last Supper was a real meal, not ritualized worship.* There was the smell of roast lamb and herbs, the clatter of dishes, the splashing of wine poured into a cup, and table talk -- whispering, laughter and questioning. There were scraps of bread and meat left in the dish -- the debris of a meal.

The eucharistic "breaking of bread" in the context of a real meal where the most basic human needs are met was taken for granted in the early church.

It should be a major concern that our observance of communion has reached the point of "trying to have a meal without having a meal," in what seems to be "an unconscious attempt by the church to protect itself from the radical, communal, transforming power of the rite" (William H. Willimon, *The Service of God* [Abingdon, 1983, p. 132) Having the Eucharist as part of a real meal -- whether with ten, 50 or 200 people -- helps one discover what has been so grievously lost.

Our various theologies say, in effect, You can't come because you don't believe, because you don't belong, because you belong to the wrong church, because you haven't joined us, because you're not old enough. Is it any wonder that many of the invited stay away *because they feel unworthy?* A Eucharist

in the spirit of Jesus' scandalous table fellowship will be open to all -- including nonmembers and nonbelievers.

*The Last Supper was a Passover meal.* The synoptics describe a Passover meal in which a group of Jews gathered and reminded themselves that they were slaves in Egypt, but God delivered them from oppression. This memory is not poetic fancy, but personal identification.

The whole people is present in the slavery of the ancestors, and it remembers the whip lashes, forced labor, hardship and cruelty. The whole people is present in the slaves' longing for freedom and in their joyous experience of liberation. The whole people remembers that little cluster of tribes, trekking out from the superpower embrace of Pharaoh's Egypt to be God's covenanted confederation. It is all very earthy and material -- a matter of politics, flesh and blood. It is also all very Godfilled, Spiritized.

Jesus chose to share bread and wine in the context of that foundational memory. There is more to be said about the Eucharist than a longing for political and economic liberation, but never less.

In the Eucharist, we follow Passover precedents by telling the story of God's liberating acts. But our story must move from the safe, uncontroversial past to give thanks for what the Spirit of God seeks to do now. The liberating power of the Eucharist would become more visible if we continued the story beyond exodus, cross and resurrection.

What, then, are our stories of the Spirit moving through history? What are the different, conflicting stories that call us to join confession with thanksgiving as we break bread? There are the stories of prairie pioneers -- and Native American suffering and resistance. There is the story of world mission seen from the white West -- and from Third World Christians, whose cultures were on the receiving end. There is the story of God's Spirit making one interdependent world -- even though it has been constructed and persists as a flawed interdependence of domination and dependence.

*Jesus took bread and a cup on the night when he would be betrayed.* Much imaginative ink has been spilled about the man *by whom* Jesus was betrayed. The quest for the historical Judas goes on -- only mildly inconvenienced by the near-complete silence of the sources.

Rather less attention is focused on recalling *to whom* Jesus was betrayed, though the evidence here is unambiguous. He was betrayed to his people's religious-political authorities and to a colonial power ruling an occupied country. His impact on those authorities was the reason for his betrayal. His entry into Jerusalem was a public challenge, and his cleansing of the temple was an attack on the ruling families' economic power -- not a reformist critique of the local stock exchange.

Though not reducible to a political program, the announcement of the impending Kingdom of God challenges and criticizes the structures of society. To celebrate the Eucharist is to remember *to whom* Jesus was betrayed, why he was betrayed and executed, and why following him will bring us into conflict with today's corrupted political, economic and, yes, religious powers and authorities.

*The Last Supper included an acted sign in the Hebrew prophetic tradition.* Just as Jeremiah publicly smashed a clay jar to announce, dramatize and explain the impending destruction of Jerusalem (Jer. 19) , 50 Jesus took bread and a wine cup. His action was neither magic nor mere symbolism, but declared what would happen, dramatized its reality, and interpreted its significance. A prophetic sign announces what God is about.

First he took bread: "This is my flesh" (Aramaic), he said, meaning his whole person, and then he announced that he would be handed over ("to the authorities" is unstated but implied). Next he took the wine cup. In Hebrew thought a person's life is in their blood. So Jesus said that his lifeblood would be shed. His disciples are to remember this handing-over and execution with the full sense of remembering that is brought to the Passover liberation. Thus, by his words and actions, Jesus declared that God was at work in this betrayal and execution, which will therefore -- somehow -- be liberating.

*Foundational to the Eucharist is faith that this same Jesus is resurrected and presides at the meal.* "This is my body" becomes present tense.

Though this understanding reaches to the heart of each individual, it cannot be a private transaction devoid of political significance. For the one who lifted up the outcasts and was executed by the world's powers is declared to be *alive*. God overturns those powers' verdict, judges their injustice and demonstrates the power of love against the worst that they can do.

Demonic powers and flawed authorities still rule (it is fanciful to say that they have been defeated) , but they have lost their legitimacy and charisma. Today in many places

The suffering churches sing his grace

and pray that we may hear and live

the gospel that they long to give.

Beset by hunger, fear and death

their hopes miraculously thrive:

they know that Jesus is alive.

And all the powers that wreck and rule

must lose their glamour, strength and skill

to dazzle minds, or crush the will.

The waking hopes of God's oppressed

will not be beaten, bowed and awed:

they tell the world that Christ is Lord

["In Great Calcutta Christ Is Known," hymn text by Brian Wren, © 1986, Hope. Reprinted by permission].

To confront death is to witness to and collaborate with the love that raised Jesus Christ from the dead. A four-dimensional Eucharist is celebrated when the eucharistic community critiques abuses of political power, resists the powers of death in our world, and stands by the oppressed in their struggles for liberation. It draws hope and encouragement from its founding events, and knows that "the resurrection is the ultimate basis for rebellion" (Rafael Avila, *Worship and Politics* [Orbis, 1981], p. 47)

*The Eucharist is a sharing community's meal.* From the beginning, celebrating the Eucharist involved sharing goods and possessions. It used to be fashionable to decry the early church's "primitive communism" as naïve and unsustainable. Yet the unity of breaking the bread and sharing the goods is a continuing strand of thought and practice throughout the church's first four centuries.

St. John Chrysostom tells us to feed the hungry, and then decorate the table. The temple of our afflicted neighbor's body, he admonished, "is more holy than the altar of stone on which you celebrate the holy sacrifice. You are able to contemplate this altar everywhere, in the street and in the open squares." Defending the Christians before the Emperor Hadrian, the non-Christian Aristides said: "If one of them is poor and there isn't enough food to go round, they fast several days to give him the food he .... This is really a new kind of person. There is something divine in them" (Tissa Balasuriya, *The Eucharist and Human liberation* (SCM, 1979), pp. 26-27)

"Communion" is not merely in the words with bread and wine duly shared, but in these together with an open sharing of goods and income. Difficult though it undoubtedly is to recover this communal sharing in an individualized enterprise culture, such a perspective is at the heart of the Lord's Supper.

Again, how we celebrate the Eucharist makes a difference. I suspect that the further we get from the real meal shared by a relatively small group, the more difficult it becomes to regain the openness and commitment that make eucharistic sharing of time, goods and money both gracious and glad. And I suspect that it is also the small group that can most deeply sense the global implications of its eucharistic sharing.

*Bread and wine are the products of human labor, which Christ takes, blesses and shares out equally.* Whether leavened or unleavened, bread signifies the "daily bread" of the Lord's Prayer. It is significant that Christ used food produced by human labor, not berries plucked from trees. Someone has sown, reaped, milled, kneaded, baked and marketed the bread that the Lord blesses. We bring to the risen Lord a symbol of all the basic food produced in our society. Our systems of production do not distribute food equally, but Christ takes food from us and ensures that all are fed.

Thus, the Eucharist is God's witness against grain mountains hoarded while people starve, against food aid as a weapon, against frontiers drawn to keep the world's poor from the grainlands, against every act that takes land and food from the poor. It is a witness to the hope and vision of a good society where all eat their fill.

Similarly, someone has pruned, plucked, pressed, racked, refined, bottled, labeled, advertised, transported, promoted and sold the fruit of the vine. Wine is a symbol of joy and celebration -- intended for all. Yet we live in a world in which some are deprived of enjoyment by the process that delivers it to others.

What wages did the vinedresser or itinerant grapepicker receive? Did the laborer who toiled in the fields for our daily bread get a fair return for the labor? To ask these questions is not to politicize the Eucharist but to face its intrinsic meanings. The eucharistic celebration is not the occasion to study and debate the causes of poverty and the mechanisms of unequal distribution. But a church that sees the implications of the Eucharist will not just talk of the "fruit of the earth and of human labour"; it will meditate -- at the Eucharist -- on how food is produced and sold. Before bringing bread and wine to the table, it will confess the scandal of starvation amid plenty. And it will take time elsewhere to reflect, understand and act for economic justice as part of its eucharistic memorial.

Though bread and wine are shared equally, this is not the equality of strict parity. Our passion for equal-sized wafers or bits of bread, or an equal thimbleful or lip-sip of wine is unwarranted. None should go hungry or have too much to drink (I Cor. 11:21) The food and drink are for eating and drinking -- to nibble slowly or bite off in chunks, according to need. A freed community will gladly pass round any remainder, for the Eucharist is not for minimal justice -- here-a-little, there-a-little -- but for the enjoyment of God's generosity.

*We are now the body that is to be broken.* The risen Christ now calls us his body. For whom are we to be betrayed and "broken" if not for the powerless, excluded ones whom Christ loves? The proper posture for the Body of Christ is not static wholeness but bruised brokenness. Brokenness is the opposite of division. Where there is division, there is competition -- a scrambling for the different bits of what was once a whole, that has been broken. In contrast, brokenness implies one body that has been broken, offered in unity of purpose. When one part is bruised, the whole body aches.

*In the Eucharist, all receive equally.* Christ draws all to himself, and loves each one equally, yet uniquely. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, master nor servant, director nor employee. At every Eucharist, our president is the servant without servitude, washing our feet and speaking ironically of the powerful who lord it over others and then claim the title of benefactor. "It shall not be so among you," he says, in giving us his body and blood.

The Eucharist is an unambiguous reminder that the church is called to build itself on relationships of love and mutuality, not power and domination -- not for its own self-satisfaction, but as a political witness, as a harbinger of the Kingdom of God.

*We celebrate the Eucharist "till he comes".* The Eucharist looks forward to a society in God, a city for all the nations, in which the last are first, the humble lifted high, and the powerful repentant, as grace and peace forgive and unite all humanity.

If this is our hope, the supper should be celebrated not as an anaesthetic against the world's injustices but as a shout of joyful defiance and rebellion -- a provocation and inspiration to make that rebellion real in love and a song of reinvigorating hope that the future can break through into the present.