

2019

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The Separation of Meal and Eucharist

All churches attempt in some way to fulfill the biblical injunction to share one's bread with the poor (e.g., Proverbs 22:9; Isaiah 58:7), but not all of them connect this specifically and directly with the celebration of the Eucharist. Indeed, many scholars in the last hundred years have tried to disassociate the sacramental bread and wine completely from regular eating and drinking. They have recognized, of course, that the Eucharist has its roots in a meal—the Last Supper—but have assumed that early Christian communities would very quickly have separated the sacred from the profane.

Thus, many have presumed that what they think of as the Eucharist proper—the bread and wine ritual—would already have been divorced from the meal by the time that St Paul was describing the Lord's Supper at Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:17–34). Some claimed that the Eucharist was located at the beginning of the evening, before the meal began (perhaps so that the participants could receive the sacrament while still fasting!). This would have meant, of course, that the poor who are said to arrive after the wealthy had begun eating would not only have gone hungry but would have been deprived of communion too!¹ Other scholars have said that the Eucharist would have occurred after the meal was over (and presumably safely cleared away so

¹ See Peter Lampe, “The Eucharist: Identifying with Christ on the Cross,” *Interpretation* 48 (1994): 36–49.

there could be no risk of contamination).² Even those who have accepted that St Paul was describing a supper that still included the Eucharist have sometimes believed that it was the bad behavior of the rich at Corinth that eventually led to the two being separated after that—not only at Corinth but throughout early Christianity³ (perhaps imagining that Paul’s authority was such that an edict from him would have been able to bring about this massive change of practice!). Such scholars have failed to recognize that for Jews a whole meal could, and can, be a sacred event—not only the Passover meal but any other occasion as well.

A similar problem has beset the meal prayers in chapters 9 and 10 of the ancient church order known as the *Didache* or “Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,” dated by some as early as the mid- or late-first century. Some scholars have denied that the occasion can have been connected to a Eucharist in any way: not only is the order allegedly “wrong,” with cup coming before bread, but there is no mention of the use of the dominical words.⁴ Others have suggested that it was a regular meal and the Eucharist itself would have come after it, one even claiming that the participants would have moved into a different room for that, so that the two could not possibly

² See, e.g., Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (New York: Scribner 1966), 121; Eduard Schweizer, *The Lord’s Supper according to the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1967), 5.

³ See, e.g., E. E. Ellis, *Pauline Theology: Ministry and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1989), 113.

⁴ See, e.g., Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre 1945), 48 (n. 2), 90ff.

have been confused.⁵ It is really only more recent liturgical scholars who have argued that the whole meal was an early form of Eucharist.⁶

Some scholars have placed the separation of the Eucharist from the meal even earlier than Paul's experience at Corinth in the 50's. The Lutheran scholar Joachim Jeremias, for example, understood the references to "the breaking of bread" in the Acts of the Apostles to designate the eucharistic action alone, distinct from a meal, as did the Roman Catholic scholar Xavier Léon-Dufour, although he had to admit that the expression "the breaking of bread" would have had its meaning extended to cover "the sacramental rite as a whole" and not just the bread ritual, because he—unlike Jeremias—could not countenance a Eucharist without wine.⁷ But when interpretations like this are applied to Acts 27:33–36, where the ship's company have not eaten

⁵ See, e.g., Jean-Paul Audet, *La Didachè* (Paris: Gabalda 1958), 415; Willy Rordorf, "The Didache," in *The Eucharist of the Early Christians* (New York: Pueblo 1978), 1–23; Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1998), 142–43.

⁶ Beginning with Louis Bouyer, *Eucharist* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1968), 115–19; Louis Ligier, "The Origins of the Eucharistic Prayer," *Studia Liturgica* 9 (1973): 161–85, here at 177–788; Thomas J. Talley, "The Eucharistic Prayer of the Ancient Church according to Recent Research: Results and Reflections," *Studia Liturgica* 11 (1976): 138–58, here at 146–50; Enrico Mazza, *The Origins of the Eucharistic Prayer* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press 1995), 12–41.

⁷ Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 120–21; Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread* (New York: Paulist 1987), 21–28. But on the phenomenon of "wine-less" Eucharists, see Andrew B. McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists* (Oxford: Clarendon 1999).

for days and Paul takes bread, gives thanks to God, breaks the bread and eats it, thus encouraging the rest to eat, scholars usually argue that here the meaning of the words here is entirely different and does not refer to the Eucharist at all.

In any case, nearly all commentators have misunderstood the relationship between bread and the meal. Many seem to have in their heads the same mental picture that I also had until not many years ago, of something like the dinner roll lying on a side plate at one's place at a formal meal in modern times, and imagine Jesus at the Last Supper and a host at a later Christian eucharistic meal taking it, saying a blessing, breaking off a little bit of it for himself and passing it round so that the rest might all have a token amount of it. But as Joachim Jeremias and more recently Andrew McGowan have pointed out, for the less wealthy bread was the principal ingredient of most meals, and in the case of the poor virtually the only ingredient, with just the occasional supplement of a little cheese or fish.⁸ In other words, breaking the bread was not just an introductory ritual to a meal that could be detached from it if desired: in many cases, it was the meal. And what happened when it was eventually moved from evening to morning was not in those cases so much the abandonment of the meal, but its reduction in size from one that was intended to satisfy hunger to one that consisted of only token amounts of bread.

From Evening to Morning

We do not know precisely when or why the eucharistic meal became a morning service, but it was seemingly much later than the scholars I have quoted earlier want it to have been. The evidence is ambiguous. Not even the detailed account of a Sunday Eucharist by Justin Martyr in

⁸ Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 51; McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists*, 79, 93.

the middle of the second century (*First Apology* 67) is necessarily of a morning service, as it is so often viewed through modern eyes. We tend to see it in terms of our own experience, imagining a sunny morning, with chariots in the parking lot outside, the congregation seated in rows, the bread and wine being carried up in an offertory procession to the president at the front, and so on. It is at least just as likely that we are dealing with an upper room in Rome's crowded streets, with perhaps thirty people squashed into it listening to readings and a homily, and then eating a simple evening meal of bread and wine brought in by deacons to the president's table first and then shared around the rest of the company.

The first explicit example of a morning eucharistic service is not found before the third century, though this is not to say that in some places the transition had not happened very much earlier. What we do know for sure is that Cyprian's church in North Africa in the middle of the third century regularly celebrated the Eucharist in the morning, but he also knew of other churches that still had an evening assembly; and the reason his church did not was a question of numbers: there were too many people to be accommodated for a full evening meal in the space available. He thought it more important to preserve the unity of a single congregation rather than separate into smaller groups, even if that meant changing the time and dispensing with eating a full meal together. Mind you, he had a problem when he argued that we are obliged to do everything that Jesus did at the Last Supper, and had to admit that Jesus did that in the evening. His rather lame answer to that is that it was right for Jesus to do so at the end of the day, "but we celebrate the resurrection in the morning" (*Letter* 63.16).

This major change of practice, eventually adopted everywhere, had a profound effect on our understanding of the Eucharist. I do not want to be some sort of fundamentalist and argue that any changes in eucharistic practice should never have happened and that we ought to go

back to the way things were at the beginning. Liturgical practices of any sort inevitably change their form and their meaning in the course of time. But we ought always to ask ourselves what we may have lost as well as what we may have gained in such changes, and this I propose to do in the rest of this lecture.

Sharing the Love

We are all aware that human social interaction and bonding is facilitated by the sharing of food. It has always been around the dining table or its equivalent that human beings have told stories, engaged in conversation, and built relationships with one another. It does not have to be a lavish banquet, but at least enough for that bonding to happen. Almost every social event we attend includes some element of eating and drinking—a wedding, a funeral, a reception at a conference, and so on. It is the way we humans show hospitality and build bonds. When I was a young curate in the Church of England, my Rector used to send me off on many afternoons with a list of parishioners to visit, and each one would inevitably offer me a cup of tea and a slice of cake. I had to accept every one of these, even though I had just consumed the same further down the road. Not to do so would have made the social bond more difficult, regardless of the detriment to my waistline and the strain on my bladder.

Thus, we share food and drink not always because we are hungry or thirsty but because that is how we relate to others as human beings. That is why the disciples of Jesus and other followers ate together, just like other groups and associations in the ancient world. And that is why the early Christians continued to eat together regularly. The food and drink were the means by which they became united to one another. What they shared was not just physical sustenance, it was companionship—the root meaning of companion is one who shares bread with you—it

was love. They experienced divine love and they shared it with one another in the context of the meal gathering. It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the names that they gave to the gathering was the Greek word *agape*, love, especially when the word “eucharist” was used not as the name of the occasion but for what was consumed. Sharing the love—that is what it was all about.

Well, you may say, is not that exactly what we continue to do symbolically at every eucharistic celebration today? But a symbol must resemble that which it symbolizes, or it ceases to be a true symbol. There is a world of difference between consuming tiny token amounts in solemn silence in the early morning and doing something similar at a party in the evening. What we lost in this transition hundreds of years ago was the human dimension, the interaction and socialization between people that forges relationships, that unites people in God’s love. As someone once said, you need Folks to turn Food into a Feast.

In other words, the Eucharist became impersonal and ceased to be a means of enabling Christians to relate to one another, the means of upbuilding the Church. And at each step along the way, the Church made it more impersonal: when we ceased to sing together or join in prayers any more because many people no longer spoke or understood Latin; when we began to kneel to receive communion; when bread was replaced by individual wafers; when the laity could no longer share the common cup; and when they were excluded from the exchange of the ritual kiss, or at best offered a wooden board to kiss as it was passed around the congregation.⁹ While the

⁹ For more on these developments, see Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *Eucharistic Liturgies: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Alcuin Club Collections 87; Collegeville: Liturgical Press 2012), Chapter 6.

Reformation may have tried to remedy some of these individual deficiencies, it failed to tackle the heart of the issue.

Perhaps the situation was not so bad in pre-modern times when most people at church lived in the same village and knew one another quite well in their daily lives, but with our larger suburban congregations in which some people may have come a considerable distance from their homes, and especially in those churches that have attracted extremely large numbers of people, the chances are that a significant proportion may have no contact with anyone else at the service. However, if you have been waiting to see me now pull the perfect solution out of a hat, you are in for a disappointment. We are not going to be able suddenly to persuade our congregations to divide up into smaller groups to eat together instead of just coming to church, and nothing I could say can change that. The best I can offer is a critical assessment of some of the actions that have been taken in many churches as a result of the twentieth-century liturgical renewal movement that were intended to try to ameliorate the situation.

Modern Liturgical Renewal: The Coffee Hour

My first example is the modern practice in many congregations of having a time for fellowship after the service is over, originally in some places a parish breakfast but now more commonly a coffee hour. That certainly restores something of the socializing dimension missing from the eucharistic rite itself. But there are a couple of weaknesses with it. Most people do not perceive it having an integral connection to communion. And that is not helped when in most cases it occurs somewhere other than the worship space itself. This is usually done for entirely practical reasons, but it does not assist in making the link. In any case, there are many congregations that would be horrified if we even started serving cups of coffee in the sacred space, let alone set up tables and

chairs for a potluck supper there. They naturally operate with the sacred/secular dichotomy I mentioned earlier.

There's another difficulty in seeing the coffee hour as part of the Eucharist: attendance is voluntary. Not everyone stays for it, and they see no reason why they ought to do so. But if you are now tempted to think of trying to force them to stay, hold on a minute. Some of those people do not come to church to socialize with others, but to have a quiet time with God, something impossible in the rest of their lives. And they want anonymity. This is certainly the case with some communicants in the Church of England. They tend to choose the early 8 o'clock service, where there will be fewer people present, almost certainly no hymns they are expected to join in, and with luck no attempt to exchange the peace. They can remain quietly behind a pillar, go to communion with eyes cast down, and if they are quick, get out of the church at the end even before the priest gets to the door to shake their hand.

Now it is easy to criticize such an attitude as a misunderstanding of what the Eucharist is all about—they are thinking that it is simply “making my communion” and not sharing in our communion with our Lord. But I believe it is a valid piety and spirituality that they are expressing, and we would lose such people from our congregations altogether if we attempt to force a social dimension on our eucharistic worship, especially if we fail to include a worship service that would meet their needs within our regular schedule. On the other hand, among those who slip out and never stay for the coffee hour are probably some who might like to do so, if we encouraged them more, but they are reluctant to take the first step. And it is not enough just to include in the notices before the service, “a warm welcome to any visitors with us today; do stay for coffee and make yourselves known to us.” Just as we have greeters or ministers of hospitality before the service handing out bulletins and welcoming strangers to the service, so too we need

similar people at the end of the service, contacting them as they are leaving, gently encouraging them to stay, showing them what to do and introducing them to other worshippers.

Modern Liturgical Renewal: The Exchange of the Peace

Another innovation of the modern Liturgical Movement in its attempts to get people to relate to one another and not merely receive communion as individuals has been the exchange of the Peace—which caught on more easily in this country than among uptight Brits! Indeed, in lots of places it has become very popular, with people not only greeting one another as prescribed but many of them engaging in short conversations with each other. The result is often to create what is in effect an intermission between the two parts of the Eucharist, where everything stops until the conversations are over. Although I would like to be a purist and rail against this apparent travesty of what the peace is supposed to be, I do accept it a genuine expression of desire for a more social version of our eucharistic practice, which strengthens my argument for developing the coffee hour.

Sometimes this exchange of the peace has been recommended to reluctant congregations as a return to doing what the early Christians did. But that is not quite true. First, it was not called the exchange of the peace then, but instead the kiss of peace, or the holy kiss. When I have told congregations this, I'm sure I have spotted them shrinking back into their seats, thinking "He's going to make us do it." Now you, on the other hand, may be thinking, "What's the difference—kiss or handshake—if they mean the same thing?" But they don't mean the same thing. In ancient Greco-Roman society, kisses were usually exchanged only between members of a family or very close friends. Thus, for the early Christians to exchange kisses between people who were relative strangers was seen as scandalous and shocking. It was a powerful

countercultural symbol, by which Christians demonstrated that they saw themselves as forming one family, which was the household of God. Indeed, some even refused any longer to kiss members of their biological families who were not Christians.¹⁰ That shows you the sort of bond that they had with one another. You will recall that Jesus said, “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” Then he pointed to his disciples and said, “These are my mother and my brothers. For anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:48–50). How far short of that is our own practice where most of us shake hands with one another at the exchange of the peace—a symbol in our society of distance rather than closeness—reserving hugs and kisses for our close friends and family.

In any case, both meaning and practice changed in the course of Christian history. It came to symbolize instead reconciliation before receiving communion; in time the gesture became restricted to the clergy alone; in the Middle Ages the laity used to kiss a wooden board passed around the congregation; and the whole thing disappeared at the Reformation. So we don’t have to try to imitate the early Church, but we can welcome the exchange of the peace as an expression of some degree of human interaction in the liturgy, even if it falls short of integrating us as truly Christ’s brothers and sisters in the household of God.

Modern Liturgical Renewal: “Gathering around the Lord’s Table”

¹⁰ For more on early practice, see L. Edward Phillips, *The Ritual Kiss in Early Christian Worship*, Alcuin/GROW Joint Liturgical Studies (Cambridge : Grove Books 1996); Michael Penn, *Kissing Christians: Ritual and Community in the Late Ancient Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2005).

A third innovation of the Liturgical Movement was the the encouragement given to congregations to symbolize more fully the vision that it is around the Lord's Table that we gather when we celebrate the Eucharist. In practice in most cases, this generally meant just pulling the altar table away from the wall so that the presider could stand behind it rather than in front of it, what came to be called "facing the people" rather than "gathering round the Lord's Table"—because it had not achieved that! This arrangement generally did not bring the presider much nearer to the congregation, and indeed the dimensions of the table might create more of a barrier between the two rather than uniting them. Only in church buildings that were either newly constructed to reflect the concept or older ones extensively and expensively remodeled, where significant segments of the congregation could be seated at both sides of the table as well as in front of it, or even behind it too, could a sense of the family of God united around God's Son be more genuinely experienced symbolically. The failure to do this has often remained the case even in places where the congregation has become so small in number that they could easily have stood in a circle round the table for the eucharistic action; but they usually prefer to stay in their places in the pews, safely shielded from exposure to one another and to the Lord's presence in the holy place while they pursue their individual devotions.

Things have generally been no better when it comes to the reception of communion. In some places it has been possible to arrange communicants on three sides of the space around the table, but many have continued to make do with the traditional communion rail solely across the front. Where the preference for kneeling to receive communion has continued, it has also preserved the sense of this as a moment of individual communion with the Lord rather than a corporate encounter between the Lord's people and their Lord. The same is true where there is neither common loaf nor common cup. And the sense of individuality has been further

encouraged by the lines of people standing one behind another as they wait for their turn, and even more so where such lines end at a communion station far away rather than at the table of the Lord. I know that in some situations the use of such communion stations seems almost inevitable given the very large number of communicants present, but I fear that they are often used in situations where that is not so: they are there simply to speed up the delivery lest the service goes on a bit too long.¹¹ It seems that our congregations, when asked by Jesus, “Could you not watch with me one hour?,” reply, “Yes, but not one minute longer.” Rather than symbolizing gathering round the Lord’s Table, these lines of individuals suggest instead the unemployed waiting to receive a handout.

Feeding the Hungry

For the remainder of this lecture I want to go back again to the table fellowship of the earliest Christians. Not many people today are aware that when the rich and powerful in the ancient world issued invitations to dine with them, they did not just go to their best friends, but also included their impoverished “clients,” that is, people who attempted to give support and service to them in some way and were in turn protected and sustained materially by them. This did not mean, however, that these poor people were served the same quantity and quality of food and wine as their betters, nor were they seated as comfortably and prominently as the rest. Sometimes they did not even manage a place at table at all, but were merely given leftovers at

¹¹ See further Margaret Daly-Denton, “There’s Always Room at the Table,” *Worship* 92 (2018): 292–97.

the host's door the next morning to help see them through the week.¹² It was obviously this arrangement to which the wealthy within the Corinthian church were conforming, with the leisure to arrive early and go ahead with the food they had brought, over-indulging and leaving slim pickings for the working poor arriving later. No wonder that they met the ire of the Apostle Paul for their behavior, which was so contrary to the union of all people wrought by the death of the Lord. He expected Christians to follow a higher standard in their treatment of the poor, loving their neighbors as themselves.

Feeding the hungry is not just one of the things that Christians are supposed to do, however: it is as fundamental to God's mission as is preaching the word. It is there in the actions of Jesus. We preachers tend to use the stories of him feeding multitudes as illustrations of how Jesus feeds us all, either sacramentally in the Eucharist or spiritually in our lives day by day. I have done it myself, and it is a perfectly legitimate way to interpret those accounts. But in so doing, it is easy for modern preachers and their congregations to lose sight of the fact that Jesus was feeding real food to real people who were really hungry, not just illustrating a spiritual truth in a symbolic way but performing a real and necessary service. His actions were intended to satisfy the hunger of all the participants, not just to give a token mouthful to each one.

¹² See, e.g., John D'Arms, "The Roman Convivium and the Idea of Equality," in *Symptica: A Symposium on the "Symposium,"* ed. Oswin Murray (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1990), 308–20; Blake Leyerle, "Meal Customs in the Greco-Roman World," in *Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 1999), 29–61.

And the early Christians did the same. Just think of the accounts of the first Christians in Jerusalem in the book of Acts, apparently sharing what they had with others, selling possessions and goods to give to the needy (2:44–5; 4:32, 34–37). Just think of the daily distribution to widows also in Acts 6, where the expanding number of followers led to complaints that not everyone of the needy was receiving equally, and the Seven were appointed to remedy this deficiency.

“Yes, yes,” you may say, “We accept that sharing one’s bread with the poor is part of a Christian’s responsibility, but what has it to do with the Eucharist specifically?” We catch the eucharistic imagery that is there in the stories of Jesus’ miraculous feedings of the hungry, and especially in John 6, which serves as a kind of narrative of institution in that gospel that is otherwise lacking from its account of the Last Supper; we perhaps spot that these miraculous feedings are not restricted to the inner circle of believers who gathered with him for meals like the Last Supper but are available to all in need; but we do not make the intimate connection between eucharistic meals and feeding the poor. Even in Paul’s remonstrance of the Corinthian church for neglecting the poor who came late to the meal we usually focus on the bad behavior of the rich and do not always carry on to consider the plight of the poor. Paul’s message is that the Lord’s Supper is not the Lord’s Supper where the poor are not well treated, where the hungry are not fed—and not fed as in the houses of the pagan rich with poor seating, inferior food, and moldy leftovers, but equally with the rest, loving their neighbors as themselves. *Agape* is universal love, not just a liking for one’s fellow-worshippers—well, most of them anyway.

Thus, the early Christians not only continued to bring food from their homes to share with others at their eucharistic meals, even after the meal was reduced to merely token amounts of bread and wine and the rest of what was brought was not required for it but available for those

in need, but they also contributed to those needs in other ways too whenever they assembled for it. Consider, for example, this passage in Justin Martyr's *First Apology* written in the middle of the second century. Just after his description of the Sunday Eucharist, he says:

And those who have the means and so desire give what they wish, each according to his own choice; and what is collected is deposited with the president. And he provides for both orphans and widows, and those in need through sickness or through other cause, and those who are in prison, and strangers sojourning, and, in a word, he becomes a protector for all those who are in want (67.6–7).

Similar statements occur in Tertullian, writing in North Africa at the end of the second century (*Apologeticum* 39), in the third-century Syrian church order known as the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (e.g., 2.36), and in other later sources. Eventually, of course, people ceased to bring actual food, particularly when special unleavened wafers replace normal bread for the communion. But the link between Eucharist and helping the poor remained, in the form of monetary gifts offered as a regular part of the Eucharist. When in modern times we started taking a collection at every sort of Christian worship service, that specific connection to the Eucharist was finally broken.

You may say: “Have not we restored something of this in the offertory procession in many churches, where bread and wine along with the collection of money are solemnly brought up from the congregation and presented?” Well, although the presentation of the money may be recognized as their own offering by the members of a congregation, I am not sure that moving the eucharistic elements from one place in the building to another will be seen as their offering of themselves and all that have, still less as their caring for the poor. Some may even think, “Wouldn't it be more efficient to have put them beside the holy table before the service began?”

Even in places where members of the congregation have baked the bread themselves, that very well may make an association between it and themselves, but neither this nor in fact the money that has been collected from the participants make any immediate symbolic or direct link to the care of the needy. The bread and wine are simply for our communion, and we know that most of the money is needed for the maintenance of the church buildings and the payment of the clergy and other staff, in other words for our own needs. Some churches may publicize the fact that they give away to charity ten percent of their income, but that hardly makes a obvious connection that the Eucharist is actually about feeding the hungry. It is not until we do something like collecting specific gifts for the poor and presenting them at the Eucharist, or the congregation go together after the service to help prepare and serve a meal for the needy, that we begin to see a glimmer of that insight.

You may feel that in this lecture I have been rather critical of present day liturgical practices, and that my subtext is really a campaign to return to the practices of early Christianity, but that is far from the case. Such an attempt would be highly unrealistic and doubtless end in complete failure. We are where we are, and we need to go forward from here. The whole point of alluding to the past so extensively is that aspects of earlier belief and practice are frequently overlooked, even when we study the Scriptures. We take in what catches our eyes and apply it to the present, but we often miss other aspects. My job as a historian is to draw attention to these often forgotten treasures of our Christian inheritance, not to ask us to reproduce them in some fundamentalist manner, but to ask us how we might restore those insights in some way in our own time, and to query whether what we have derived from the modern Liturgical Movement is always the right

way. It certainly makes me think rather than accept without question, and I hope it may do the same for you.