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The Lord's Supper: Christ's Real Presence.

What were they thinking and feeling?

By the time I made profession of faith I had a pretty good idea. The sacrament is a memorial, I knew, a sign and seal of Christ’s death for my sins. So during my first Communion, I strained hard to acknowledge my own sinfulness and to believe with all my heart that Jesus had really died for me. After all, I didn’t want to eat and drink in an unworthy manner.

Conversation with other members of the church confirmed that my experience of the Lord’s Supper was pretty much like theirs. Now I knew first-hand what had been going on inside all those adults.

I still find that many people in the CRC, with most Protestants, approach Communion the way I did.

Our hearts and minds focus on the connection between our salvation and the past event of Christ’s death. We memorialize the fact that long ago Jesus hung on the cross for our sins. We are careful to note that the bread and wine we eat and drink in memory of him are only signs and seals, not “the real thing.” The present elements are symbols of a Savior who is not here.

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As a small boy I oftened wondered what it was like to take the Lord’s Supper. What was going on inside all of those serious-looking grown-ups as they reflectively chewed the bread and reverently swallowed the wine?

School of Pietro Lorenzetti: Last Supper, before 1348
and wine are literally the body and blood of Christ. We also tend to omit the real presence of Christ and his real act of giving us the benefits of his real body and blood.

The Real Presence of Christ

The real presence of Christ is taught by Article 35 of the Belgic Confession: “This banquet is a spiritual table at which Christ communicates himself to us with all his benefits. The Confession emphasizes that Christ is really present in person and that he is the primary agent. He is the host of the supper. He invites and feeds us. He is among us to bless us. The sacrament is not primarily a church supper which we put on for him. And the proper spiritual orientation is not primarily remembering the past. It is fellowship—communion—with the real Jesus in the present. This Jesus is Christ the King, the one seated at the right hand of God his Father in heaven.”

But aren’t we to celebrate the sacrament “in remembrance of him” and “to remember his death until he comes”? Yes, of course. But we are to do this in the presence of the real, contemporary Jesus, not by turning away from him to the crucifixion 2000 years ago. We remember that the ascended Lord with whom we now commune is the one who died for us and rose again. Perhaps a human analogy will help. I can remember the wonderful times I had with my grandfather and the love that he showed me while he lived on earth. But how much more wonderful it would be if we could remember those times together again in one another’s presence. So it is in the sacrament. We remember Jesus’ death for our sin in fellowship with him, for he is really present as host of the banquet. But when I was young, celebrating Christ’s death was more like remembering the love of my grandfather in his absence than sharing the memories with him.

A Real Means of Grace

Calvin and the Belgic Confession not only agree with Roman Catholics that Christ is really present in his Supper. They also taught that the sacrament is a means of grace, an event through which Christ really and directly blesses us. In Communion we are not blessed merely by remembering what Jesus did for us on the cross long ago. The sacrament is not just a symbolic reminder of God’s other acts of grace. In it Jesus is really present and really builds us up. The Belgic Confession teaches that “Christ communicates himself to us with all his benefits...He makes us enjoy himself as much as the merits of his suffering and death, as he nourishes, strengthens, and comforts our poor, desolate souls...and relieves and renews them.” Jesus is touching us directly. We are not just receiving blessings as by-products of remembering his death. Roman Catholics are not alone in believing that Christ actually imparts grace to the believer through the sacrament.

The Real Body and Blood

Further, the Belgic Confession repeatedly affirms that the grace we receive is from the real physical body and blood of Christ. “truly we receive into our souls...the true body and true blood of Christ.” And again: “We do not go wrong when we say that what is eaten is Christ’s own natural body and what is drunk is his own blood.” How surprising! This affirmation of the reality of Christ’s physical nature is from the Belgic Confession, not a Catholic catechism.

What then is the difference? It is the way in which we understand how Christ imparts the benefits of his real physical body and blood to us. The traditional Roman Catholic view is that the bread and wine miraculously become the body and blood of Christ and that by God’s Spirit they infuse us spiritually as we ingest them physically. The body of Christ comes down from heaven.

The Reformed view is that the manner in which we eat “Christ’s own natural body...is not by the mouth but by the Spirit, through faith.” As we eat the bread and wine in faith, Jesus by his Spirit really is present and really does impart himself to us, including the benefits of the death and resurrection of his physical body, which remain in heaven. The Belgic Confession acknowledges that “the manner in which he [Jesus Christ] does it goes beyond our understanding and is incomprehensible to us, just as the operation of God’s Spirit is hidden and incompre-
God's presence among us creates and sustains the unity of believers. That biblical teaching was the heart of the previous editorial. The Lord's Supper is the sacrament of that reality: a sacrament of Christ's presence and church unity. Sadly, the historic debate in the Christian Church over the nature and reality of Christ's presence in the sacrament produced disunity. It even prevented the Lutheran and the Reformed branches of the Reformation from joining together.

My question for this editorial is this: Is it possible, at least in part, that our views on the visible unity of the church have been inadequate because our understanding of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper has been inadequate?

Two Stories

I recall the first time that I had a Lutheran student in my class. It was more than thirty-five years ago, at the beginning of my teaching career. In a conversation I asked her about her views on the Lord's Supper. I discovered she had not been instructed in the complexities of Lutheran theology. When I described the traditional Lutheran view that Christ was bodily present in, with, and under the elements, she declared that she had never heard that before.

The second story concerns Dr. Peter Kreeft. Professor Kreeft wrote recently in The Banner and mentioned that he had grown up in the Reformed Church in America and had graduated from Calvin College. While a student there, having researched the theology of the Early Church, Peter Kreeft became convinced that the Roman Catholic Church held the correct view on the nature of the presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist. So he became a Roman Catholic and has been a professor of philosophy at a Catholic university.

What interested me about his reasons for converting to Roman Catholicism was his description of his understanding of the Lord's Supper in Reformed theology. In one of his essays he puts it this way: Christ had to draw him away from a church where Christ was present only subjectively, in the souls of good Protestant Christians, into the Church where He was more fully present, present also objectively in the Eucharist (Ecumenical Jihad: Ignatius Press, 1966, p. 145-46). But is that the reformed view of Christ's presence? Is Christ present only subjectively in our hearts? Is Christ not present in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper?

A Real Presence

When Peter Kreeft grew up, both in the RCA and in the CRC there was a strong practical influence of the Zwinglian view of the sacrament. This view holds to no real presence of Christ in the sacrament; instead, the sacrament is a memorial focused on the death of Christ. With such a view, Christ's presence is only in the hearts of believers.

Although Luther suspected Calvin of holding a Zwinglian view, Calvin actually occupied the middle ground between Luther and Zwingli. There is a story told about Luther that in his last years he read Calvin's "Short Essay on the Lord's Supper," and said to a friend that he should have left the controversy to Calvin. Perhaps this story is legendary, but Calvin's lucid essay could well have been attractive also to Luther. Calvin teaches a real presence of Christ in the elements of the Lord's Supper. It is a spiritual presence, but real nevertheless, not just a presence in our spirits but in the bread and the wine. The bread and wine are visible signs, but they are not empty signs for they present to us what they represent. "Two things are presented to us in the Supper," says Calvin, "Jesus Christ as source and substance of all good; and second, the fruit and efficacy of his death and passion" (Calvin: Theological Treatises, p. 146). The Lord's Supper presents to us not only the benefits of Christ's death but, rather, presents to us Jesus Christ Himself together with His benefits.

Unity

The Lord's Supper is one means by which the Living Lord communicates Himself to us. His presence always intends the unity of believers. Our participation in the sacrament, our participation in Christ, says something about all others who eat and drink with us. We are together members of His Body, and therefore members one of another. This is not a matter of our choosing but of His creating.
worry activities. This “breaking bread” was done “daily.” The other important reference is Acts 20:7. Here the breaking of bread is linked to the “first day of the week,” and is generally interpreted as a celebration of the Lord’s Supper—presumably every week.

In the history of the church after biblical times we find an unbroken chain of weekly communion. The heresies which began to surround the Lord’s Supper nearly suffocated the biblical thrust of the communion meal, but the weekly administration continued. However, even with the frequency all was not continued Calvin, since we’re trying to reform worship according to biblical models, let’s have communion often, as in the book of Acts. Let’s have it “at least once a week.”

Calvin tried (literally till his death) to implement weekly communion, but he could not prevail. The consistory of Geneva were like practical church councils everywhere. You can imagine them saying, “Pastor Calvin, you remember when we tried to change the time of worship last year? We had an uproar in the congregation. Can you imagine what the

when I preach or teach at various churches, I usually ask, “How often does your congregation celebrate the Lord’s Supper?” The answers vary widely. Some monthly, some eight times a year, and a fairly large number four or six times. I am not going to advocate that these congregations celebrate communion every week. Of course, the New Testament church did have weekly communion, and the church in its early history did so. John Calvin, our spiritual grandfather, told us we ought to celebrate the Supper at least once a week.

But I am not going to advocate such frequency. Instead, I hope that more churches will adopt monthly communion. I’ll give my reasons in a minute, but first a quick history lesson.

A (Very Brief) History Lesson

The place to start is the book of Acts. In Acts 2:42 and 46 we read twice that the Christians in Jerusalem were engaged in “breaking of bread.” Bible scholars are about evenly divided on whether this was simply a common meal or a simple form of the Lord’s Supper. I believe it to be the latter, since the meal is closely linked with prayers and attending the temple—both

people will say when we try to change their communion habits from once a year to once a week? Pastor, be realistic.”

Some Old Advice

The rest, as the saying goes, is Reformed church history. In the first century after the Reformation we find considerable variation, with many churches opting for monthly communion. But the churches later sagged back into medieval spiritual sloth—four times a year became the norm and some Presbyterian churches settled for Calvin’s “invention of the devil”—once a year.

Calvin hoped that some day all Reformed churches would be ready for weekly communion. Perhaps that time will come some future day. However, it seems to me that most CRC congregations are not ready for such

a drastic change. Four hundred years of quarterly communion is not easily shaken. (Perhaps I’m too pessimistic. Four hundred years of banning the singing of hymns was changed rapidly in the 1930s). But how about monthly communion? That appears to me a goal that many congregations can and will strive for. Why would they?

One important reason is an old one—four hundred years old and found in Calvin’s Institutes. Calvin writes eloquently and passionately about the benefits of Lord’s Supper. Among all the wonderful things he says, the one he comes back to again and again is the one of nurture. We eat and drink bread and potatoes, wine and milk because our bodies need the nutrition. And then Calvin says something like, “Don’t you get it? Doesn’t your spiritual life need nurture? Well then, come to this banquet of the Lord’s Supper and eat and drink.” Or, to quote him exactly: “The Sacrament does not cause Christ to begin to be the bread of life; but when it reminds us that he was made the bread of life, which we continually eat, and which gives us a relish and savour of that bread, it causes us to feel the power of that bread. For it assures us that all that Christ did or suffered was done to quicken us; and again, that this quickening is eternal, we being ceaselessly nourished, sustained, and preserved throughout life by it” (Sec. 5).

Find a copy of the Institutes, and work your way through Book 4, Chapter 17. That’s how I became persuaded.

If you prefer not to read that much Calvin, then find a Reader’s Digest version in the “Belgic Confession” in the back of the Psalter Hymnal. Again, why bother with the Lord’s Supper? Because this banquet is a spiritual table at which Christ communicates himself to

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frequent communion. First, increased frequency of communion, they say, will diminish the preaching of the Word. But an unproved argument from fear is not a very valid objection. Those churches which have gone to weekly or monthly communion still have faithful preaching. The second objection is also frequently voiced: “If we do it too often, won’t it become too common?” It’s strange that we use this argument about the Lord’s Supper and not about preaching or praying or singing psalms. It certainly is possible to pray or to sing thoughtlessly and carelessly. But the solution is not to sing less frequently (four times a year?!), but to sing with conviction and devotion.

But some readers may still feel the way my Aunt Gertrude felt: “I don’t want to feel sad in church that often.” Her main association with the Lord’s Supper was a preoccupation with sin, because of the emphasis on self-examination before the Supper. And the atmosphere at the Lord’s Supper usually reminded her of the funeral home. Of course, the Lord’s Supper always is a reminder of our sins and of the death of Christ. But that is not the only focus of the Supper. We celebrate the Supper on Sunday, on the day of resurrection. Besides remembering the Lord’s death, at each communion service we say with the early Christians “the Lord is risen, indeed!” In addition to singing “O Sacred Head Now Wounded,” we also sing, “I Serve a Risen Savior.”

Life-Giving Power

So, besides looking back and remembering, the Supper also gives us the power of Christ—right now! Back to John Calvin once more: “We now understand the purpose of this mystical blessing, namely, to confirm for us the fact that the Lord’s body was once for all so sacrificed for us that we may now feed upon it, and by feeding feel in ourselves the working of that unique sacrifice.... We are therefore bidden to take and eat the body which was once for all offered for our salvation, in order that when we see ourselves made partakers in it, we may assuredly conclude that the power of his life-giving death will be efficacious in us.” (Sec. 1: emphasis added)

And part of the proof is in the eating. In our congregation we have moved to a monthly celebration of the Lord’s Supper. One elder said recently, “I had many reservations about this frequency, but now I have experienced a wonderful blessing.” Part of the proof is in the tasting. If we come (to quote Calvin one more time) “like hungry people and flock to such a bounteous feast,” we will taste the Lord’s goodness (Sec. 46).

And who knows, fifteen years from now (if we’re not all yet at table at the Supper of the Lamb), I may write another article. I’ll remind readers of what John Calvin said, “the Lord’s Table should have been spread at least once a week for the assembly of Christians....” And some congregations might say, “Yes, we are hungry for such nurture—every week!”

between Christ’s physical death and resurrection and our complete salvation, both body and soul. This real union with Jesus Christ is constant; it does not occur only in celebrating the sacrament. But the celebration of the sacrament is a special event in which Jesus Christ uses the visible means of bread and wine to actively impart the benefits of his physical body and blood to his people. The sacrament is not just a reminder that Jesus died for us and that we live in communion with him. It is real, life-giving communion with him.

I am grateful that I have come to understand the Christian Reformed doctrine of the sacrament better than when I made profession of faith. How much more spiritually enriching it is to kneel in the very presence of Christ the King and to receive his gracious embrace than to hope that a blessing will come through the hard work of remembering him in the right way.
All the Kings’ Horses & All the Kings’ Men

What is more critical...style of leadership or message and vision?

Will leadership training or contemporary styles of leadership help the church to survive relevantly in the 21st century? Recent publications on church management and leadership, based on sociological research and studies of biblical leaders, argue that it will. But what is more critical to the church’s survival: a model or style of leadership or the message and vision of the leader? And how should a leader think about the existence of the church in the world, and its relevance? These matters receive ample attention in the Former Prophets that recall Israel’s entrance and expulsion from the promised land. In this article we will focus on the Bible’s answer to what is more crucial. In a subsequent article we will apply this to certain issues related to contemporary ideas about leadership.

An Exciting Commitment

About five hundred years earlier, when Joshua was still alive, Israel’s ancestors had solemnly promised to serve God. Joshua called the tribes to Shechem for a renewal of the covenant. There he reminded Israel of their ancestors’ worship of strange gods, of God’s faithfulness, from Abraham through Egypt to the gift of the land. Then he challenged them to serve the Lord alone; not the gods of the Canaanites. “No!” they cried, “we will not serve the gods of our forefathers, nor the strange gods of this land. Only the Lord who brought us out of Egypt!”

When Joshua challenged their words of commitment, they swore an oath. They knew what their mission was; they were committed to the vision of covenant obedience in the promised land: submission to the law of the Lord. It would be their delight! Only that commitment would fully bring about all God’s promises to his people. Ahead lay only the exciting days of finishing the conquest under the leadership of Joshua and those who would follow him. And then peace: each home with a vineyard and a fig-tree.

What Happened to the Faith?

But as is so often the case, the day after a great service of worship and praise is not quite the same: the same boring spouse, whiny kids, exacting boss, lazy employees, nothing has changed. Excitement and commitment? Not at home, not at work! You go looking for it.

After Joshua and his generation of leadership died, God’s people forsook him; they went after the local health and wealth theologies of Baal and Ashtarte. They argued: “The covenant God was gracious in Egypt. He marvellously sustaining in the desert, formidable in the conquest, but... that was then; this is now. We’re the new generation; those who lead like Joshua did are not up to it; we need excitement in our religion, something to replace the boredom of everyday living!”

Excitement they got. They provoked the Lord to anger; he sold them to their enemies and allowed them to be defeated. Redefining the faith in local terms led to a conflict with God himself. What they took to be a revitalization of the faith led to death in the land flowing with milk and honey. They undermined the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

But God was good. When they cried to him in their distress he sent them new leadership who delivered them from their enemies: an unexpected Deborah, a recalcitrant Gideon, the wily fighter Jephthah, and the womanizer Samson. Such were God’s chosen leaders! And God’s people rested from their distress. But when these effective leaders died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt; they refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways; they
KINGS' HORSES cont.

Jeroboam had a clear vision: to ensure the loyalty of his citizens among the ten northern tribes he instituted new worship centers at Dan and Bethel. Otherwise they might go to Jerusalem, the place which the Lord had built for his presence among all his people. By marrying against the Lord's wishes, Ahab revitalized Israel's worship and faith with Jezebel's religious counsel. When God sent Elijah on house visitation there were 7000 who had not worshiped Baal. Manasseh, the Ahab of the southern kingdom, redecorated the Lord's temple with Baal symbols. These kings had not completely rejected the Lord; but they combined the faith with contemporary religious symbols and meanings, effectively redefining and obscuring the truth. These kings were forward looking with an eye to the local culture. They led and designed new worship opportunities; and the people followed.

But not all the kings provided false leadership. In spite of Israel's rejection of God's leadership, God sought to use human kingship to lead his people in righteousness, to save them from their own wickedness. Moses clearly taught that Israel's kings should lead according to the words of the law; to turn neither to the left nor the right (Deut. 17); these words were repeated to and by Joshua (Joshua 1:23). In David Israel received a king who ruled in justice and righteousness; he loved God with all his heart and sang God's praises. With him the Lord made a covenant: one of your descendants will always sit on the throne; he will lead Israel into rest. Among these descendants were Hezekiah, who trusted the Lord deeply when challenged by Assyria; and there was Josiah.

Josiah had the right vision. When in his reign the words of the law were found he led God's people in sorrowful repentance and solemn reformation. The Passover was celebrated with such joy as had not been experienced since the time of the judges. He cleansed the temple defiled by his father Amon and grandparent Manasseh, and got rid of the mediums and spiritists. There was no king like Josiah "who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with the Law of Moses." Such faithfulness could only bring about good. If God is for us, who can be against us?

Sometimes the right vision does not matter.

But what if God is against us? All of Josiah's righteous deeds did not turn away the Lord from his anger against Judah, because of Manasseh's wickedness. Josiah's good leadership, his true and right knowledge of the law was not enough. Not all the kings' horses, not all the kings' men, nor all of king Josiah's loyalty to the Lord could put God's people back together again! The Lord decided to remove Judah from his presence (2 Kings 23:26-27).

That's the story Israel heard, the rivers of Babylon: their kings were a poor excuse for God's leadership. Was this so because they were kings? Or because they were merely human? No. It was because they forgot to remember the past and were only forward looking; they forgot God's word revealed at Sinai. But the message was for God's people, too: they had been such easy prey for up to date leadership and had thonged like lemmings to the bells, blood, and smoke of Canaanite worship. The people of God and their kings reaped what they had sown (Deut. 8:19-20). And now, far away from Jerusalem, they are a laughing-stock among the nations.

Did contemporary leadership styles help Israel to survive relevantly in her environment?

God Save the King!

Nevertheless, the last word of the narrative (2 Kings 25:27-30) brings good news. But it's so understated. Unless you are an exile weeping in Babylon and, upon hearing the last paragraph about Jehoiachin's release from prison, you faintly recall your grandparents' singing about God's promise to David, you could miss it. Jehoiachin is David's son! Is God remembering his promise? Will God save the king, inspire all his horses and all his men?

By the rivers of Babylon Israel waits, she weeps and sings: "O come, O come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the son of God appear!" Far from the city of God, his people continue to wait upon the King as he provides faithful leadership. And they wait. While we wait, let us hear what the Spirit says to the Church, lest our candlestick be removed!
Preaching the Word

Any second Bill hoped to hear some specific instructions for the week ahead. But he waited in vain. Nothing specific was forthcoming. Just more encouragement to follow the Lord. For Bill the maddening part was that there were no instructions.

Bill was reminded of the time he bought a new gas grill that came in a surprisingly small box. The outside of the box had written on it “assembly required,” but at first Bill did not fully appreciate what this would mean. Inside the box were a dozen or so large parts, and a plastic bag stuffed with various sizes of screws, nuts, and all sorts of unidentified little parts. Bill looked for the instructions so that he could put the grill together. But he couldn’t find the booklet. Finally he called the 800 number of the company that made the grill and explained the problem. They apologized and promised to send the instructions by overnight mail. The next day the instructions arrived.

Bill had known that the instructions were supposed to be in the box. The company really didn’t need to tell him to follow the instructions when they came, and they didn’t. That part was pretty obvious.

Sitting in church, though, he wondered why the preacher was spending all his energy explaining something equally obvious. Of course Christians should obey the Lord. Now he wanted to hear the instructions themselves. But in this sermon there were no instructions. On reflection it seemed strange to him that a gas grill company would worry more about including instructions than a Christian preacher. After all what’s more complicated, Bill thought, putting a grill together correctly or putting your life together?

Bill’s mind wandered. He speculated what it would be like if there was an 800 number he could call to complain. He wondered if the preacher would apologize for not including any instructions and promise them in the morning. He doubted it. Bill remembered hearing sermons 30 years ago in which the preacher said that Christians didn’t do some things, like go to foul movies or work on Sunday. He remembered sermons condemning drinking and gambling, too, and sex outside of marriage. He remembered worshippers being told to pray and read the Bible regularly each day, to come to church (twice), and to send their children to Christian schools. But it had been a long time since Bill had heard such instructions from the pulpit.

On the way home from church Bill decided that it wasn’t entirely the preacher’s fault. People, even Christians, just don’t like to be told what to do. Specific instructions sound like commands, and commands only happen when someone thinks he is superior to someone else. But nowadays no one is superior. Including the preacher. Even kids call him “Bob.” Everyone has an opinion. So what right does the preacher have to tell others what to do?

For family devotions at Sunday dinner Bill read Matthew 7, the conclusion of Jesus’ sermon on the mount. He paused over the last two verses: “the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one having authority, and not as their teachers of the law.”

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“What Paul is saying to us in this passage,” the preacher droned on, “is that we must do God’s will. We must follow his leading, wherever it may go, and say and do what the Lord wants us to say and do.” Bill looked around at his fellow worshippers. They seemed for the most part to being paying attention. Their eyes were lifted up and they were giving every appearance of attending to every word. Bill himself was having some trouble focusing. What was the preacher trying to say? Was he simply saying that Christians should obey the Lord? That’s easy to say. The hard part is getting clear about what that really means. What does the Lord want us to do? What is the message here?