

Sacramental Baptists

I Corinthians 11:17-33

The word “sacrament”^{[i][i]} has not enjoyed a high status among Baptists. We followed the wrong Reformer, **Zwingli**^{[ii][ii]}, with his refusal to see anything of value in the signs of the presence of God. In America, Baptists have been influenced by **Alexander Campbell** who famously said, “No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible, no law but love.” This is the same Alexander Campbell whose teachings once left this church with only 8 members, 8 staunch Calvinists to keep First Baptist Church alive. Campbell’s draconian reduction of faith left Baptists with too few resources. With the “catholic spirit” of **John Wesley**, I want to remind you that sacraments are sacred signs, made up of words and actions, employing material symbols, through which God bestows life on us by the Spirit. Ascension Sunday is a good time to tell you about sacramental baptists.

Ascension Sunday celebrates Jesus returning to heaven. At least a year before his death, Jesus promised to send his disciples a new Advocate, the Holy Spirit to be with them. At the last supper, he said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” “This is my body.” “I am with you in the supper.” When Jesus left his disciples, they felt his absence. It was painful.

Do you ever feel God has left you, that God is not close to you? Left out of everyone else’s joy and camaraderie? I believe that Elijah felt abandoned when Jezebel wanted him dead. “I’m the only one left,” cried Elijah. All those prayers in the Bible: Please God, don’t leave us alone. Don’t hide your face from us. Don’t leave us out here in this wilderness. Alone. Abandoned. We feel it.

The poet **Sharlande Sledge** tells us about the Celtic idea of “Thin places, both seen and unseen, where the door between this world and the next is cracked open for a moment and the light is not all on the other side. God shaped space. Holy.” The sacrament of Holy Communion is such a thin place where the glory of the Lord is revealed, where the presence of God is experienced, where heaven and earth intersect.

How do we get to one of these thin places? We can remember. I love the Baptist emphasis on memory. Once upon a time, memory was all that kept faith alive. The story of the gospel was told and retold from person to person from community to community. Memory is a powerful thing. So when Jesus says “Do this in remembrance of me,” we should actively remember. Remember the Supper of our Lord. Let the eyes of your mind see Jesus lifting that bread and saying, “This is my body.” Remember he didn’t say, “This represents my body.” He didn’t say, “This is a metaphorical paradigm of my body.” Jesus says, “This is my body, given for you.”

What happens today will be the only food you will have one of these days. The wilderness will be your west, your east, your north, and your south and you will be hungry and thirsty. And the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper will be enough. It will get you through. "Do this in remembrance of me." Never make too little of this bread and cup.

But there's more to it than memory. Memory needs a practicing community. The keepers of memory must be doers of the Word. Jesus said "**DO** this" and that is more important than remembering. We can't eat this bread and drink this wine and remain the same old people. Paul claims that the Supper has to do with our ethics, that bodily strand of Christian teaching that emphasizes how we behave toward others. "Our eating with our Lord is not different from our learning to be his disciples, his holy people."[\[iii\]\[iii\]](#) The Lord's Supper has everything to do with our being the body of Christ – a people who have learned to live in the presence of others without fear and envy. Taking this bread means taking Jesus – all of him, his teaching and his practices into our bodies.[\[iv\]\[iv\]](#) I received a letter criticizing my offer to ask our Muslim brothers and sisters to forgive some Christians for their nasty rhetoric and stereotyping of all Muslims as terrorists. My critic talked about the evil done by some Muslims. Following Christ has nothing to do with how others mistreat us, and everything to do with how Christ calls us to treat others. You can't eat this bread and go out and hate Muslims.[\[v\]\[v\]](#)

I love the catholic emphasis on the presence of God in communion. The Bible is filled with stories of God showing up at meal time. See Abraham by the oaks of Mamre. The Lord appears to him, and angels show up and Abraham feeds them. And after the meal, the angels tell Abraham the fate of Sodom. Abraham then offers a prayer for God to spare Sodom. Meal followed by prayer for forgiveness of Sodom. Don't make too little of this meal. ^{3**2}

We keep taking this bread and wine into our bodies, because we need God to be present with us and among us and for us. Religious experience of a high order means that we have to keep coming back by it. We have to keep doing our worship work: Confessing sin, seeking the Lord with a willing heart, eating the bread and drinking the wine. There can be no casual meeting with God.

Only if the Holy Spirit shows up and God's people show up for work, only then will our worship be a sacrament. Worship is hard work. In fact, the hard work of worship is the cure for boredom. My dad always had the same answer to me saying, "I'm bored." As soon as I was bored, he gave me work to do. "Get the hoe and chop the weeds out of the watermelon patch." "Wash the car and cut the grass." Kierkegaard claimed boredom would be the death of the church, but there ought not be any bored Christians because we are working our hearts and minds and bodies off to please God. There's

no excuse for Christians to be bored because Jesus has promised to show up for church.

We need to make more opportunities, create more holy spaces, where God can be present. The sacrament of Holy Communion is one of our thin places. With Fanny Crosby, we can sing: Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! O what a foretaste of glory divine! Don't make too little of this meal.

[i][i] Preaching is the primary Baptist sacrament. John Milbank's account of the eucharist is quite similar to Karl Barth's account of proclamation, which makes one wonder what difference it makes whether one concentrates on word or sacrament. The church doesn't have to choose one or the other – Word or table – as the primary sacrament. Both Word and table are necessary for the nourishment of the church.

[ii][ii] "External things avail nothing for salvation," he preached. He introduced a metaphysical dualism into our understanding of the ordinances and rejected fifteen centuries of Christian thinking on the subject. Baptists are plagued by an addiction to Enlightenment culture, modernity, individualism, moralism, and nationalism. It is hard to find a church hiding under all that commitment to the powers and the principalities. How can the church be a sacrament – a sign of God's kingdom in the world – if the church is a sign of the world?

[iii][iii] There is a direct relation between our celebration of the Lord's Supper and the demand that we be a holy people, a peaceable people. The Lord's Supper is not an isolated act separate from the kind of people we are meant to be. We become a people capable of forgiveness in a world that would have us believe that human relations are ultimately determined by manipulation and violence (Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*).

[iv][iv] Baptists are often nervous about making a big deal out of communion because so many Baptists think the Roman Catholics have made too much of the meal. There's a fallacy in this argument. And the fallacy is that it puts us in the position of making too little of the most important meal in the church's history and life. We end up practicing the real absence of Christ rather than the real presence. Our church celebrates the sacrament once a month and this is more frequent than most Baptists. I appreciate that but wish that we could move toward celebrating every Sunday. This is, of course, a personal wish, and not something that is likely to ever happen. There are many reasons that Baptist churches do not celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday. It's too Catholic people will say. Preaching is more important others will say and I am tempted by that idea. It would become a ritual that lost its meaning if we did it every Sunday. That argument of course doesn't hold up since we also do so many other things every Sunday and I would hate to think that we would stop doing certain practices because we are afraid they would become rote rituals. Praying the Lord's Prayer, for example, never becomes old. It's too formal we cry, but being formal is a

matter of the heart. I think the main reason is that most of us no longer believe that our salvation comes through something as flesh and blood as the body and blood of Jesus. Harold Bloom argues that Southern Baptists and Mormons are the most Gnostic religious expressions in America. Our presumption is that Christianity is about the "spiritual," and we like it that way. If it is spiritual, then it is all about the individual and your needs: what you like, what you want, what you support, what you believe. We also think that the spiritual is neater, tidier, less messy. If it is all spiritual, we think we know how to look spiritual, talk spiritual, and act spiritual. That this gives birth to the most grotesque forms of hypocrisy seems never to deter us. For many Baptists the spiritual is the opposite of all the things that make life good. Mencken said A Sunday school is a prison in which children do penance for the evil conscience of their parents. Puritanism. The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy. To be spiritual is to be anti-body, anti-sex, anti-pleasure, anti-fun. It is to deny that the flesh is a gift of God and filled with delights. It is to make of religion a dreary practice of dreary habits. And the perversion of this attempt to be spiritual. It dualism divides the spiritual from the fleshly and people are pretty much left alone to do what they want with the stuff that really matters, that is the body, sex, and money. We jump through all these hoops in desperate attempts not to deal with the unsavory nature of real human lives. Religion is material, so fleshly, so physical. No wonder we would rather hear the word as isolated spirits, as individuals on our personal spiritual quest, where each person can believe or not believe any damned thing she pleases as long as it is pleasing to her.

[\[v\]\[v\]](#) Vincent Donovan, in his book about his missionary work with the Masai, describes how during arguments a tuft of grass might be offered by one Masai to another as an assurance that no violence would erupt. "No Masai would violate that sacred sign of peace offered, because it was not only a sign of peace; it was peace." The beginning of mass would involve the whole village as every activity of the village from praying for the sick to dancing, would become a natural part of the mass. The leaders of the village would decide if the eucharist would be served. If there had been selfishness and forgetfulness and hatefulness and lack of forgiveness in the work that had been done, in the life that had been led there, the elders would decide there would be no eucharist. "If the grass had stopped, if someone, or some group, in the village had refused to accept the grass as the sign of the peace of Christ, there would be no eucharist at this time."