Baptist Basics

BAPTISTS TOGETHER

5 The Lord's Supper

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Communion or the 'Lord's Supper' is an act of worship that involves eating bread and drinking and wine. Baptists normally observe this at least once a month and usually use non-alcoholic wine. Nearly all parts of the world wide Church celebrate communion (the exceptions are the Salvation Army and the Society of Friends) although with a diversity of styles and understandings. Some seek to express its importance by turning it into an elaborate ceremony. Baptists prefer a simple and uncomplicated form of worship. However, they are able to share with others a range of words to describe this act. The term 'Lord's Supper' refers to the fact that Jesus instituted it on the final evening of his life. 'Breaking of bread' is a partial description of what takes place as a loaf is broken and distributed. 'Communion' refers to the experience of oneness with God which comes from Jesus' sacrifice and which is renewed in the communion service. 'Eucharist' comes from a Greek word meaning 'thanksgiving' and the service itself is one in which we give thanks for the gift of God's Son and of the Spirit through him. The diversity of words points to a richness of meaning in the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper is one of the central acts of worship in the Christian Church. It is based upon the specific command of Jesus to his disciples on the night on which he was betrayed. At that time, Jesus met with his disciples to eat the Jewish Passover meal. In the course of the evening he took bread, gave thanks

for it and shared it among them with the words, 'Take, eat; this is my body'. After the supper he took the cup of wine and shared that also, saying 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Matthew 26:26-28 see also Mark 14:22-25 and Luke 22:14-23). In doing this Jesus established a practice that has been continued ever since by his followers. Through this simple meal, he assigned a meaning to his death which would follow on the next day. He interpreted it as a death for us which would bring about the forgiveness of sins and a new relationship with God. The early church continued to practise the Lord's Supper and it is referred to in particular, by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 in what have come to be called 'the words of institution'. These give a glimpse into the way communion was shaped in early times.

The meaning of the Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper has past, future and present dimensions.

It has a *past* dimension because it remembers and recalls certain events that have taken place in history. In this regard it grows out of the Jewish Passover which was a way of recalling and reliving the saving events of the Exodus when Israel was delivered from slavery in Egypt and the threat of death. The bread and wine are symbols that the Son of God became flesh and blood and in that humanity offered himself as an atoning sacrifice upon the cross. He is indeed the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29). Communion is therefore based upon an historical event which is deemed to have significance for the whole world. In Christ, God has done something that transforms the human situation and opens up a way of access to God. Communion points to this and is a continual reminder of it. The Lord's Supper proclaims the historical reality that Christ has come.

It has a *future* dimension because it anticipates a future reality. When Jesus broke the bread with his disciples he went on to say, 'I tell you, I will never

again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom' (Matthew 26:29). In part this was fulfilled when Jesus ate with his disciples after the resurrection (10:41). But beyond that, Jesus anticipated the coming of God's future kingdom as the celebration of a great feast when, 'many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 8:11). As well as looking back therefore, communion looks forward to the future God has prepared which is aptly described in the form of a celebratory feast (Isaiah 25:6-10). There is also the promise of Christ's future coming (Acts 1:11; Hebrews 9:28). This is the 'marriage supper of the Lamb' (Revelation 19:7-8). There is also the promise of Christ's future coming (Acts 1:11; Hebrews 9:28). If looking back to Christ's death strikes the note of solemn remembrance, the future dimension inspires joy and hope. Both these notes are appropriately struck in the celebration of communion. The Lord's Supper proclaims the future hope that Christ will come again.

It has a *present* dimension properly summed up in the word 'communion'. Through communion we experience the benefits of the risen Christ with us now. By the Spirit, Christ comes amongst those who gather in his name to seek him. It is not that he comes in the bread and wine as such, but in the church's shared action of eating bread and drinking wine with each other. In this way communion becomes a means of grace, a way in which God's grace is communicated to the people of God for their health and renewal. The Lord's Supper proclaims the present experience that Christ comes to us by the Spirit.

The continuing sign

Baptism can be thought of as the initiating sign of God's kingdom[1]. It marks a person's entry into the kingdom of God in the life of the church. Communion is about the continuing of that life within the church. Because it belongs to the beginning, baptism only needs to happen once and having been laid as a foundation does not need to be repeated. But communion can be repeated again and again since it has to do with the sustaining of our life in God and this is always necessary. Baptism and communion share common features. They both refer back to the cross of Christ, baptism through its symbolism of burial and resurrection and communion through the bread and wine. This marks them out as being different from, and more central than other practices in the life of the church. They also can be traced directly back to Jesus and

so are sometimes called ‘ordinances’, because they have been ordained by Christ. They are both also appointed places where we encounter God afresh. God is able to meet with us anywhere, but baptism and communion can be seen as places of rendezvous, where God has promised to meet consistently with those who seek him. It follows from this that Christians should share communion on a regular basis as part of what God gives to nourish them in love for God and each other. Churches vary as to the frequency of communion, but few will observe it less than once a month.

Communion is good for each Christian, but it is also good for the community of the local church. Alongside the preaching of the Word, it acts as a ‘visible word’ which speaks of our salvation (1 Corinthians 11:26). It takes us back on a regular basis to the cross of Christ and focuses our attention on his sacrifice. It draws us together in unity around him and reaffirms that bond continually. It reminds us that we are all equal in God’s eyes since all of us need the grace of God. It breaks down the barriers of ethnicity, culture, wealth and status and requires us all to share in one simple meal. It releases to those who have faith in Christ a renewal of his grace and goodness.

The practice of communion

Although the first Christians probably shared communion as part of a regular meal together, practice shifted towards celebrating it as a distinct act of worship in the congregation. This process was probably already under way in the New Testament itself (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). The earliest Baptist practice of sharing one loaf and one cup containing real wine shifted for

reasons of hygiene and temperance to that of using cubes of bread or smaller loaves and small, individual cups of non alcoholic wine. There is now a movement back in some churches to the undoubted practice of Jesus himself and of earlier generations of Christians of using a shared cup.

It is important that thought be given to the administration of communion and to the more presentational aspects of the event. Since it is a visible drama, what communion looks like matters. Baptists originally restricted access to the meal to those who were baptised church members. A strict order was observed by which people were first baptised, then entered into church membership and then received communion. The idea here is that communion is a serious and not a trivial act and should be reserved for those who are known to be pursuing true discipleship. But there are other things that need to be emphasised. For instance, communion is about hospitality and generosity which suggests that there should be an open invitation to members of other churches and traditions to share in communion without first having to conform to Baptist convictions. If the Supper is really the Lord's then any person who belongs to the Lord should have the right to share it. This surely must also include those with special needs. An invitation commonly given is to 'all who love our Lord Jesus Christ and are walking in love and charity with their neighbour'. With such an invitation, people are left free then to make their own decision in good conscience as to whether they should participate. An open meal seems to accord well with the freedom with which Jesus himself ate with people, even those regarded as unworthy 'sinners' (Mark 2:15-16). But it is entirely reasonable to expect that only those who are able to do so sincerely and truthfully, should share in communion The ability to worship 'in spirit and truth' is what God seeks (John 4:24). For this reason believers and others who may be present are rightly asked not to share in communion in an 'unworthy manner' (1 Corinthians 11:27).

Communion belongs to the churches

While Baptists see the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God, they are also keen to emphasise that it is not the offering of a sacrifice which makes atonement for sin. That sacrifice was made by Jesus once for all on behalf of the whole world and need never be repeated (Hebrews 9:28; 1 Peter 3:18). However, the benefits of Christ's sacrifice, in the forgiveness of sins and peace with God, have to be continually received anew. Communion is one of the ways in which this is done. By remembering and recalling the

cross, it is as though past events become present realities and we enter into the good things that have been accomplished for us. The once for all sacrifice of Christ becomes a living power as we enter again into the new covenant relationship with God it has brought about. Communion therefore is more than just remembering. It is about a living experience of the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit.

Traditionally, to emphasise that communion is not the offering of an atoning sacrifice administered by a priest, the Baptist way of sharing communion has had certain common features. Although it will usually be presided over by an ordained minister, a person authorised by the churches to act in their name, this does not have to be the case. A church may appoint some other trusted person who is not ordained. Many churches have begun to experiment with different ways of shaping the communion service, including inviting people to the front of the church building to receive bread and wine. Typically though, bread and wine will be shared with by deacons or other members of the church, passing it around the congregation. Often the congregation will share the bread and wine with each other. Ministers too will receive the bread and wine from other church members. The idea behind this is that communion, like baptism, belongs to the congregation. It is not owned by a priesthood that then hands it down to others for their salvation. It belongs to the congregation as a 'royal priesthood' (1 Peter 2:9), for their mutual encouragement and growth in grace.

[1] See Baptist Basic - Believers' Baptism

Series Author: Dr Nigel G Wright
Former Principal: Spurgeon's College

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Baptist Union of Great Britain
Baptist House PO Box 44 129 Broadway Didcot Oxon OX11 8RT United Kingdom
telephone 01235 517700 facsimile 01235 517715 email faithandsociety@baptist.org.uk
website www.baptist.org.uk Registered Charity Number 1125912