

Faith and Society Files: Real Life Worship Files – Lord's Supper

Does what happens at Sunday worship connect with life in the real world? For many people the answer to that question is often 'no'. This leaflet introduces a series of worship files published by our Union to help churches relate their worship to the realities of contemporary living. In this file we look at the practice of the Lord's Supper.

The Credibility Gap

Sometimes there seems to be a credibility gap between the Lord's Supper as a central feature of worship and the ambiguous feelings and emotions people express when they reflect on their experiences of communion.

For many who sit around the edges of the community of faith this meal is problematic. It is hard for those outside the church to see why Christians would focus on a brutal execution and find in it words of hope and signs of faith. For others in the church, emotions and thoughts around what we are doing in communion seem very diverse and even confused:

'It's like being the only one sober at a party. I just don't get it.'

'I remember my conversion and feel the emotions of that moment every time I take communion.'

'I cannot take communion ... not since the death of my son.'

'I wish my husband could take communion but he is not baptised.'

'Where are the children?'

These comments reflect some of the diverse feeling and comments people express when thinking about the Lord's Supper.

- *Why does such a variety of experience exist?*
- *What do you think is going on in this meal?*
- *Who is being urged to remember what?*

WHEN YOU SHARE IN THE LORD'S SUPPER...

What do you feel about the event?

What is the significance of the meal for you?

What form does the meal take?

Does the pattern and context of the meal ever vary?

Does it matter to you who leads?

Does it matter to you who participates?

Whilst there is much more to worship than the events around the Lord's Table, this meal constitutes an essential part of the worship service and as such surely deserves to be understood and remembered rightly.

- *Do you think our ambiguity reflects sloppy thinking?*
- *What do you learn from the meal about who God is and how God's reconciling love and forgiveness is extended into the world?*

Remembering Rightly – back to the future

The Greek word *anamnesis* means 'to remember'. From the roots of this word we have the English word amnesia meaning 'to forget'. Yet have we forgotten who and what we are supposed to be remembering when we share the Lord's Supper?

The verb 'to remember' can sometimes feel like a backward looking, passive activity and this is sadly how some people experience the communion service: a sombre memorial, funereal in tone and mood.

But in terms of scripture (Hebrew and NT writings) the act of remembering for God's people is a forward looking exercise... we are encouraged to look back in order to go forward in hope. By remembering the story of God's faithfulness towards his people in the Exodus and by celebrating the compassion and generosity of God in Christ's coming, dying and rising, the worshipper is given confidence to look forward in hope.

The power of the meal then is based on a process of **deep remembering**.

Remembering through time –

Through participation in the story the perspective of the community is given a past, a present and a future component; not locked in the past but drawing on it, not trapped in the present but finding God in it, and not afraid of the future but moving towards the goal with confidence and hope.

Remembering across space –

Through participating in the story of the meal, the community focus is given both horizontal and vertical dimensions. It moves towards God and towards our neighbour at the same time so that life in God is nourished and deepened and relationships in the human community are nurtured so that the healing, restoration and reconciliation that flows from the cross is a real life worship experience.

WHEN YOU SHARE IN THE LORD'S SUPPER...

What thoughts and feelings come into your mind when you hear the words, '*This is my body which is broken for you*' and '*this cup is the cup of the new covenant sealed by my blood*'?

Which of the following words best sums up for you the significance of the death of Jesus: 'sacrifice', 'victory', 'inspiration', 'honour satisfied', 'wrath appeased', 'debt paid', 'love revealed'?

Which hymn or song best expresses for you the significance of the Lord's Supper?

Remembering our Story – changing attitudes and understandings of the Lord's Supper in the Baptist story?

As a Baptist community whose understanding of the church is that of gathered believers, it is our conviction that in the course of God's unfolding covenant journey with us we will change in response to time and circumstances. But just as we look back and draw upon the biblical history, so we can also value our particular history and experience as Baptists and see it shaping our current understanding and practice. So as we think about the meaning and importance and practice of the Lord's Supper in contemporary worship let us consider these two contrasting stories from our own history.

Story 1

In the nineteenth century Baptists went deep into controversy over the question of who could participate at the Lord's Table. The debate divided between the open

communionists who invited 'all who loved the Lord' to partake, and the closed communionists who invited only those baptised as believers and in membership of a believer's church to do so. Robert Hall, a minister in Cambridge, contended that the table should be as open as possible to believers from all traditions, irrespective of whether they have been baptised. Hall's chief opponent was Joseph Kingshorn, a minister in Norwich. His argument was that 'it is not according to the law of Christ that persons not baptised should come to the Lord's Table'. (For both Hall and Kingshorn infant baptism meant unbaptised). Whereas Hall wanted to be generous to the unbaptised, Kingshorn thought this would have negative consequences for the Baptist understanding of the church. Firstly it would weaken the witness of the church to the NT practice of believer's baptism as a sign of repentance and commitment, and secondly, it would erode the Baptist distinctive of being a gathered or believer church.

Story 2

A city centre Baptist church has held a lunchtime service for a number of years. In contrast to Sundays, people gathered around the table to share in both an intimate and reflective communion service followed by a simple meal of soup and bread. The numbers who came were not large but it was a significant moment in the week for them all. The church then made plans to open a café once a week, as people sat around the tables. Perhaps the relaxed setting could make this a creative mission opportunity. For this to be the case there could be no sense of exclusion. All those who came to the café that lunchtime would be invited to share in the bread and wine.

- *How do you respond to these two stories?*
- *What are the strengths and weaknesses of each practice?*
- *Read Matthew 14.13-21 and Matthew 26.17-30. What can we learn from these two stories about the meaning of communion? What do they say to us about who should be welcome to participate?*

The apostle Paul tells us of the institution of the Lord's Supper:

For I received from the Lord
what I also handed on to you,
that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed
took a loaf of bread,
and when he had given thanks,
he broke it and said,
'This is my body that is for you.
Do this in remembrance of me.'

In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying,

'This cup is the new covenant in my blood.
Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'
For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup,
you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

1 Corinthians 11.23–26

