

## **Bodily Presence and Online Communion**

**David N. Field**

The theological crux of the debate online Holy Communion does not lie, in my opinion, in the possibility that God, in God's freedom, might use such a practice to encounter people and thus not in the related question of the presence of Christ in the sacramental elements. Rather the crux lies in the question of whether the real bodily presence of the human participants with each other is an essential element of Holy Communion. As a consequence many traditional Eucharistic theologies focused on the issue of the presence of Christ, such as that of the Wesley, do not make a significant contribution to responding to this issue. Rather this issues challenge us to not merely to evaluate the validity of online communion but rather to engage in a new way the meaning of Holy Communion; such an engagement can lead to the emergence of an enriched understanding of Communion which relates to our context in a fresh and dynamic way.

### **Holy Communion and the New Testament Meals**

Jesus' celebration of the Last Supper, which inaugurates the celebration of Holy Communion, stands in the centre of a continuum of celebratory meals described in the New Testament. On the one hand it looks back to Jesus' practice of sharing meals and his parables describing meals. On the other it points forward to the meals celebrated by the early church. This tradition of the celebratory meals in turn takes place in a context in which communal meals a significant part of the cultural life of the Greek and Roman world<sup>1</sup> and in the Jewish tradition of celebratory feasts.

#### **The Context of the New Testament Meals**

Common meals were a significant element within Greco-Roman culture at the time of the New Testament; aspects relevant for this paper include the following:

- The people partaking in the meal (in contrast to those who served) reclined at the table. Such reclining usually entailed considerable bodily nearness even physical contact.
- Meals were an embodiment of communion, friendship and love between the participants

---

<sup>1</sup> See for example Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning was the Meal* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003)

- The communal dynamics of the common meal (included seating arrangements, types of food and who ate what food) were a concrete manifestation of the ideals of the association responsible for the meal. These dynamics could reflect or contrast with the relationships within the structures of society.

### **Celebratory meals in the Jewish Tradition**

The Old Testament describes and prescribes a range of celebratory meals. Ancient Israelite worship not included the common eating of sacrificial offerings in the presence of God as well as major festivals. The celebration of the Passover, for example, was a family meal in which the Israelites remembered their coming into being as a people through God's act of liberation.

The Old Testament places an account of Moses and the elders of Israel sharing a meal on Mt Sinai and seeing God as part of the inauguration of the covenant with Israel. While some of the prophets and post Old Testament writers look forward to an eschatological feast as the consummation of God's relationship with Israel. This joyous communal celebration is often described in wedding imagery.

A further dimension is the restrictions of the kosher laws which functioned as markers of identity and difference resulting in the exclusion of certain forms of eating and the close community with gentiles.

### **Communal Eating in the Gospels**

Jesus' teaching reflects the tradition of the eschatological banquet as a means of explaining his understanding of God's reign. However some have important twists. The first is the inclusion of unexpected people and the exclusion of expected participants. Sinners, the lost, the strangers, the prodigals, the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, and gentiles are included. In many of cases these people would have been excluded from contemporary feasts because of their bodily ailments. The presence of unacceptable and rejected bodies will be welcome at the eschatological feast. Secondly these parables do not merely express a hope for the future but challenge the hearers to live in the light of this hope. Hence, for example, Jesus commands his disciples to invite to their feasts the rejected and excluded bodies. A third element is that in various ways Jesus teaching upsets the hierarchical ordering present at many meals – the disciples should take the role of one who serves and not one who reclines and they should not seek the prominent place in the bodily nearness to the host but rather the place at the distance.

Jesus praxis of eating embodied his teaching. He provided food for the hungry crowds who would not have been welcome at the feasts of the wealthy. He characteristically ate with sinners, prostitutes, and tax collectors whose bodily presence was regarded by the religious elite to be defiling. He accepts the touch of a woman deemed to be a sinner. He takes on the role of the servant and washes his disciples' feet. His teaching and praxis demonstrate a laxity in observing the food laws opening the way for a more comprehensive community.

The gospels portray Jesus as creating a community which welcomed into its fellowship those who were excluded and rejected and in which the social hierarchies were subverted. This was expressed concretely in Jesus' eating praxis.

### **The Last Supper**

The descriptions of the Last Supper in the New Testament constitute a critical puzzle with different emphases and significant difficulties in determining what goes back to Jesus.<sup>2</sup> A few points are relevant for this paper.

- The Gospel texts narrate the Last Supper as in some sense a Passover meal which Jesus wished to share with his disciples. The disciples are thus constituted as a fictive family with Jesus as the head.
- Jesus and the disciples demonstratively participate together in the meal by dipping bread into the same bowl; this communal sharing is made more poignant by the participation of Judas.
- During the Passover celebration each person would have had their own cup of wine and drunk from it. Jesus departs from this tradition by taking his cup and sharing it thus emphasizing the communal character of the sharing together as the people of the new covenant.
- The common drinking from Jesus' cup may also refer to his earlier question to the James and John as to whether they were able to drink for the cup he would drink from (Mark 10:35-40) and hence was a reference to fellowship in cruciform service of each other and a rejection of the hierarchies of power. Luke, notably, placed the discussion about who was the greatest among the disciples in the context of the Last Supper. John described Jesus as taking the role of the servant and washing the disciples' feet. The Last Supper embodied a rejection of the social hierarchies of power and a call to mutual service.

---

<sup>2</sup> See for example Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1980), 30-56.

- Jesus announces that he will only drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom comes thus portraying the Last Supper as an anticipation of the coming eschatological banquet.
- John emphasizes the bodily intimacy by describing the beloved disciple as reclining on Jesus breast.

### **Meals in Acts**

Eating together is central to Luke's description of the communal life of the new born church in Acts 2: 42-47. It alongside mutual sharing of goods is one of the concrete manifestations of the community amongst the early Christians. The text refers to both the "breaking of bread" and eating food together suggesting that a combined a common meal that included a ritualized breaking of bread after the pattern of the Last Supper. The issue of eating soon becomes an issue within the new community. This occurs firstly with the neglect of certain widows in the daily distribution of food. Secondly the debate around the inclusion of gentiles within the church revolves around issues of food initially in the case of Cornelius and later when the issue is resolved in Acts of the Council of Jerusalem. The conclusions of the council all relate to common meals (abstaining from meat offered to idols, blood, and meat from strangled animals; and from after dinner sex). This would have enabled the common participation in meals that included the "breaking of bread".

### **Common Eating in Paul's Letters**

Paul dealt with common eating in various contexts. He attempted to solve the problem of meat offered to idols in a way which would enable Christians to participate in common meals while respecting the consciences of all involved. In Galatians Paul criticized Peter for withdrawing from table fellowship with gentiles and accused him of denying justification by faith. Common eating together was an embodiment of common acceptance by God through faith in Christ. Refusal to eat together was a bodily proclamation that the Gentiles were required to do something more in order to become part of God's eschatological people.

Paul's instructions for the Lord's Supper in I Corinthians provide numerous suggestive details about how it was celebrated in the early church. The ritual braking of bread and sharing the cup took place within the context of a larger meal probably reflecting the general pattern of Greco Roman celebratory meals. However problems occurred due to the social divisions within the church. Presumably the common meal

was being held in the home of a richer member of the community. The richer members were taking the best of the food and the drink while the poor received the leftovers. This happened either because the rich came early and received the best food; or because they reclined in the dining room where they were served first with the best of the food while the others had waited in other parts of the house. The presence of the poor could have been offensive as bodies of the poor were, in the ideology of the Greco-Roman elite, deemed to be unnatural and repulsive.<sup>3</sup> Hence this meal praxis embodied the social structures of Greco Roman society and not the alternative values of Christ. A number of points in Paul's response are significant.

- Paul's discussion was characterized by words such as "sharing", "partaking", "partners" and "coming together" strongly emphasizing the bodily communal character of the Lord's Supper.<sup>4</sup>
- Paul emphasized that the communal sharing in the one loaf manifested and constituted the participants as members of the one body of Christ.
- The practices of the wealthy Corinthians were a failure to "discern" the body of Christ and this constituted an "unworthy" eating and drinking. The primary reference of the "body" in this context is most likely the ecclesial body. The wealthy failed to recognize that the poor were the body of Christ – the concrete embodiment of the One who chose the foolish, the weak and the despised.
- The Lord's Supper was the proclamation of Christ's death. While Paul did not explain what he meant by this, one possibility is that it proclaims Christ's death to the extent that it embodies the self emptying love of the one who became poor, took the form of a slave, was rejected, and endured the degradation and agony of crucifixion for our sake. The proclamation is not words but the praxis of those who are bodily present with each other and for each other.

### **Some Theological Considerations**

The New Testament descriptions of the Lords Supper need to be seen in the context of three important theological themes.

---

<sup>3</sup> See Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 3-37.

<sup>4</sup> See James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998), 616 & 617.

## **The Incarnation.**

The central confession of our faith is that the Word has become flesh; God became human as the embodied Jew from Nazareth. God was present on earth in the form of the human body of Jesus who shared his life with others in particular those who were on the margins including those whose bodies were declared to be unclean. This identification with excluded bodies culminates when Jesus, the embodied manifestation of God is whipped, spat upon, stripped, excluded, and crucified. It is at this the point of bodily humiliation and agony that God was most profoundly revealed. The celebration of the Eucharist is the affirmation of the full bodily character of God's revelation in Christ symbolized in bread and wine. It is in the physical signs of his humiliation, suffering and death that the church encounters Christ.

## **The Cosmic and Communal Character of Salvation**

Contemporary scholarship has emphasized that salvation in the New Testament is to be understood as the eruption God's eschatological reign that will be consummated in the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead rather than the journey of individual souls to heaven. Individuals participate in God's reign through union with Christ. The church is the body of Christ composed of embodied human beings united to Christ through faith expressed in baptism which is the sacramental washing of the body. As such in its character as a community of embodied people the church is confessed to be the sign and anticipatory presence of God's reign. The communal life of the church ought to be shaped by and manifest this confession. It is at the Lord's Table that the church gives concrete expression to this.

## **Reconciliation in Christ**

An element that arises from the above is the affirmation that the reconciliation brought about through the death of Christ is not only reconciliation between God and humanity but also between human beings. The epistle to the Ephesians affirms the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles through the cross which abolished the law. Through the cross other divisions of between human beings are overcome as Christ identifies with the excluded and rejected ones thus abolishing the human rejection and exclusion of other humans. By Spirit the church is transformed, empowered and called to embody this reconciliation in its corporate life.

## Wesleyan Insights

John Wesley argued that communion was a means of prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace but his theology focused on the personal encounter between the crucified Christ and the individual participant. Other aspects of his teaching and praxis can however be used to enrich his Eucharistic theology.

### **Social Holiness**

The meaning of Wesley's phrase is debated; however a careful reading of the preface to the 1739 edition of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*<sup>5</sup> and his fourth sermon on the Sermon on the Mount<sup>6</sup> suggests the following. The social character of religion and holiness arises out of the centrality of love which is manifested in the relationships between people. Social holiness refers on the one hand to the manifestation of love in the Christians relationships with others and on the other to the love that only develops in real interaction with people. As we engage our people in all their complexity in a loving manner so our character is transformed to become more loving, that is more holy. In this sense Wesley affirms that works of mercy are a means of grace.

### **Wesley's Identification with "the outcasts of men"**

A characteristic feature of Wesley's praxis and theology was the importance of interacting with, caring for and identifying with those he described as "the outcasts of men" – the poor, the sick, criminals and other social outcasts. For Wesley this included his open air preaching in poor communities, visiting those in prison, accompanying the convicted to the gallows, visiting the sick, and eating common meals with the poor.<sup>7</sup> This engagement with the marginalised and excluded was both an expression of holiness and a means of growing in holiness – becoming more like Christ.

---

<sup>5</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (begun as "The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley" [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975–1983]; continued as "The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley" [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984—]) 13:36-40

<sup>6</sup> Works 1:531-549.

<sup>7</sup> See Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992)

## The Lord's Supper as a Communion with Other People

While Wesley's theology emphasised that participation in the Lord's Supper was communion with the crucified Christ post Wesleyan Methodist theology came gradually to recognise that it was also a communion with one another. This development reaches a significant high point in *This Holy Mystery*.<sup>8</sup> However on the way towards this recognition the devastating failure to embody this in the actual worship of Methodist churches must be acknowledged. In the US context this was manifested in the relationship between white Methodists and African American Methodists. In early American Methodism the practice arose of compelling African-Americans to sit in a separate part of the church and to serve them communion last. The presence of black bodies was not acceptable to white members in general and in particular the practice of white members drinking from the same cup and eating from the same plate used by African-American members was to be avoided. Racially segregated congregations became the norm culminating in the creation of the Central Jurisdiction for African American congregations. Similar racially segregated worship and communion has occurred in other societies. The communal character of communion can be violated in other ways, thus *This Holy Mystery* rejects "self service" and "drop in" communion.

### Preliminary Conclusions

The discussion above suggests the following theses with regard to Holy Communion.

- Salvation is the eruption of the reign of God, portrayed in the image of the eschatological feast, in the midst of history through the life, ministry, and death of Jesus the "Word made flesh". The reign of God is the establishment of *Shalom* – peace and wellbeing – between God and humanity, between human beings and between humanity and the rest of creation. Integral to this is the hope of the resurrection of the body.
- A key feature of the ministry and teaching of Jesus is his identification with and the inclusion of those who regarded as spiritually or bodily unacceptable. A process that reaches its consummation in his exclusion from the community of Israel in the shame and pain of his naked broken body on the cross.

---

<sup>8</sup>See <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/this-holy-mystery>



- The church is the proleptic presence and sign of the fullness of God's reign and this is most profoundly manifested at the Lord's Supper as the anticipatory embodiment of the eschatological feast.
- Jesus the excluded, shamed and crucified host of the meal, stands amongst those whose bodies have been rejected; he calls us to commune with him and them through the physical symbols of his rejection and brokenness.
- The celebration of the Lord's Supper is the embodied manifestation of the unity of the universal body of Christ as we drink from one cup and eat from one loaf. Inherent to this is the coming together of Christians as a community to participate together in communing with God in Christ by the Spirit.
- The celebration of the Lord's Supper is to embody the counter cultural cruciform character of the gospel which welcomes all, embraces the rejected, subverts hierarchies, overcomes divisions and provides for the deprived.
- The Lord's Supper proclaims the death of Christ by its embodiment of the ethos of the cross. It is in this way a means of prevenient grace.
- The Lord's Supper is an open table at which all regardless of race, gender, cultures, socio-economic status or other socio-bodily distinction are welcome. As such it is a means of justifying grace embodying God's acceptance and forgiveness of all who come in faith.
- The Lord's Supper as the bodily communion of diverse people is a means of sanctifying grace, for through our mutual communion at the table we practice and grow in cruciform love for each other.

In the light of the above the bodily presence of diverse people is an integral part of the meaning of the Lord's Supper. While in certain circumstances the number of embodied person's might be limited as in the case of the sick or imprisoned this remains the exception to the extent that it seeks to include those who are excluded for bodily reasons beyond their control. Even then the fuller body of Christ is manifested in the person who brings communion to such people.

### **Bodily Presence and Internet Communion**

The internet has created new forms of community transcending some of the limitation of space and time. It has become a place where people of diverse cultures, social strata and nationality can meet. People meet with each other, find partners, develop relationships, and create new political, cultural, and social movements. It is a place of learning and teaching. It enables families and friends separated by vast

distances to maintain their relationships. It has become a means for communicating the gospel and building people up in their faith. It has become a means for empowering people to communicate who for various social, bodily and psychological reasons were not able to do so. Yet it does so by transmogrifying the bodily into the virtual. The intimacy of bodily nearness communicated through smell and touch is evaporated into the visual. Objectionable bodies are removed and replaced with images, icons and avatars or merely pictured and kept at a comfortable distance. This transmogrification can create the illusion of bodily communication yet can this be a means of obscuring and hiding the body. The virtual can become the means of avoiding the bodily and physical. It releases one from the commitment, hard work and emotionally draining interaction of embodied persons in all their physicality. Rather one establishes virtual friendships with people whom one does not know. One can communicate to all who are online in tweets without any bodily or emotional context.

The issue of the internet communion does not relate to the quality of the community the internet creates for it can manifest the best and the worst of human social interaction but to the question of bodily presence. While the internet is useful in establishing and maintaining community, including Christian community, the transmogrifying of the bodily into the virtual entails in the loss of a important component of what it means to commune with each other as embodied persons and hence significantly reduces the meaning of the celebration of Communion. It subverts the call to come together in all our bodily diversity and peculiarity at the Lord's Table to eat of the one loaf and drink of the one cup. It rather enhances the privatisation and individualisation of life and faith. Communion is reduced to a virtual private interaction between the Christian and Christ, and it thus ceases to be the present embodiment of the eschatological feast. While admittedly some of our contemporary practices of celebrating communion also diminish this impoverishment cannot justify another. Our goal should rather be the enrichment of our present praxis.

The relationship between the use of the internet and communion is analogous to the role of the internet in romantic relationships. People can meet each other through dating websites, communicate with each other by email and in chat rooms, and develop a deep and honest relationship with each other. But the time comes when a bodily encounter meeting with each other is essential. Communication through sight and

vision is not enough for flowering of the relationship; this requires touch and smell, the bodily being with each other and for each other. Those who are in relationships may for various reasons be separated for a while and hence communicate over the internet but this is a poor substitute for being with each other. In the same way the internet can be a means for communicating the gospel and for creating and developing Christian community, but such community is deformed if it does not lead to communion in the bodily presence of each other. The very physicality of eating and drinking with each other is a countercultural protest in the name of the incarnated, crucified and bodily risen Christ against the reduction of relationships and of reality to the virtual.