

ABSENT FRIENDS: DO BAPTISTS NEED TO REIMAGINE HOW THEY CELEBRATE THE LORD'S SUPPER?

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Much of the discussion or debate amongst Baptists concerning the Lord's Supper has focussed on the way that Jesus is present at the table, if at all¹. Such a focus on what is happening to the bread and wine has typically meant that Baptists have given little thought to what sharing at the table might mean for the gathered church². The plural in my title, *Absent Friends*, raises the question of whether it is not just Christ's presence that is missed at the Table; by placing the emphasis so strongly upon personal devotion, is the church absent as well?

Over the summer of 2016 I conducted a survey into Baptist practice of the Lord's Supper that received responses from 69 different Baptist ministers. To tease out the details I invited twelve to take part in follow-up interviews. The results of this, albeit small sample, confirmed that the communion meal (as Baptists overwhelmingly prefer to call it) is not very much of a communion at all, if by that we mean a meal that deepens the fellowship of those who share it.

In the majority of cases, members of Baptist congregations remain in their seats to receive the bread and wine; and this is brought to them by either the minister or the deacons of the church. The wine is almost always shared in small cups rather than in a common cup. And this is true even on the very few occasions when people are invited to come forwards to receive the bread and wine. There is also very little happening in the way of gestures or movements that might enable a largely passive congregation to recognise who else is there. Only a few churches shared the peace and even those that did admitted that they don't do this often. When asked about the use of patterns, such as those in *Gathering for Worship*³, and particularly prayers in the patterns that involve congregational responses, the impression given was that this happens occasionally, and perhaps more so with the advent of new technology, but it is not the norm⁴.

This is not to say that those surveyed or spoken to lack the desire to get people more involved, and in fact the process also revealed a good deal of imagination that was encouraging. What it does suggest is

¹ See for example Michael Walker, *Baptists at the Table* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1992), 90-97, with reference to dispute between Godwin and Pusey.

² Scott W. Bullard, "Communing Together: Baptists Worshipping in the Eucharist," in *Gathering Together: Baptists at Work in Worship*, eds. Rodney Wallace and Derek C. Hatch (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 99-102. There are exceptions to this. For example, see Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 168.

³ *Gathering for Worship* is the most recent manual of resources for Baptist worship in the UK. It was published in 2005.

⁴ See Myra Blyth, "A Sign of Unity: The Changing Theology and Practice of Lord's Supper amongst British Baptists," in *Gathering Disciples: Essays in Honor of Christopher Ellis*, eds. Myra Blyth and Andy Goodliff (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 130. She argues that, when it comes to the use of liturgical patterns, "modern technology... has won over the hearts and minds of Baptists where texts alone did not."

that current practice of the Lord's Supper in many Baptist churches does little to encourage those who come to see sharing the bread and wine as in any way identifying them as the body of Christ.

The question of how we got to this place means that we go back to the history, because I want to suggest that our failure to discern the presence of Christ as we come to the table is in part the reason we do not discern his body. Now I am sure that there are many who understand the journey that Baptists have been on regarding the Lord's Supper better than I do. As such it is not my intention to rehearse many of the details. However a few broad brushstrokes are necessary.

Early Baptists picked up and continued the Calvinist understanding of the English Separatist movement out of which they grew. This is evident, for example, in the writings of the influential Baptist Thomas Grantham, as well as in the confessions and creeds of both the General and Particular Baptists that appeared in the seventeenth-century⁵. Calvin's view was that the bread and wine were not simply there to bring to mind the sacrifice of Christ, but rather were symbols that by the operation of God's Spirit could transport the believer into the presence of her exalted Lord.

Using hymn texts, as well as the confessions and other writings, Michael Walker has shown that this was the dominant Baptist view until the nineteenth-century, when fears of a return to Catholicism provoked a severe reaction.⁶ The outcome was that Baptists by and large embraced a memorial view that is often associated with Calvin's fellow reformer Zwingli, although there is good reason to believe that Zwingli's actual views are seriously misrepresented by the resulting Zwinglian position taken by Baptists⁷. David Bebbington argues that the subsequent Baptist view was influenced by more than just anti-Catholic sentiment, and among other factors he includes the triumph of rational thought over the idea of sacred mystery, which he says is evident in the writings of John Clifford⁸. The memorialist position promoted by Clifford, and which came to be the Baptist norm, regarded the bread and wine as mere symbols that, like the sermon, were effectual only in that they helped the believer bring to mind the sacrifice that Christ had made for her⁹.

Baptist rejection of Christ's presence at the table continued throughout the twentieth-century, despite the efforts of some to recover a more sacramental theology and practice. In her survey of the Baptist manuals for worship that were published in this period, Myra Blyth shows how there has been a movement back towards a more sacramental understanding of the Supper and then away again. Patterns in the latest manual, when seen alongside Paul Goodliff's survey into Baptist views of ministry, suggest the direction has

⁵ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 164-166. David Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 184-185.

⁶ Walker, *Baptists at the Table*, 2, 17-30, 85-90.

⁷ Keith G. Jones, *A Shared Meal and a Common Table: Some Reflections on the Lord's Supper and Baptists* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 1999), 8-12. See also Curtis Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 334.

⁸ David Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries*, 185-90, gives five reasons for what he calls the "decline of high churchmanship" amongst Baptists with regards to the Supper: the priority given to defending believers baptism; the change in the intellectual climate brought about with the Enlightenment; the Evangelical Awakening and the emphasis upon experience over matters of order; the enduring power of anti-Catholicism (given further weight by the rise of Tractarianism); and, a greater emphasis on respectability and professionalism in church affairs.

⁹ Walker, *Baptists at the Table*, 6-7.

changed again, but how much this is reflected in Baptist churches is open to debate¹⁰. The evidence of the surveys and interviews confirms the judgement made by Walker, Bebbington, and others, that Baptists have been left with a practice that is unfocussed, and determined more by pragmatism than any theological understanding or wider purpose¹¹. With the focus of the memorial position on the bread and wine as simply there to call to mind Christ's sacrifice, is it any wonder that most Baptists treat their participation as one of personal even private devotion?

This emphasis on Baptist practice of the Lord's Supper as primarily concerned with the believers' personal relationship with Christ has been further influenced by other historical changes, of which I want to briefly mention just one. Not one of the ministers who responded to the survey restricts participation in the Lord's Supper to those who are in membership of their church. Again, as Walker has shown, prior to the nineteenth-century a closed table would have been the default position of Baptists, but the influence of Robert Hall changed that, initially to make room for other Christians, despite their 'faulty' baptism!¹² It is not my intention to argue against an open table—I share the view of others that the last supper for Jesus was the sum of the other meals that he shared, at which all were welcome, and fellowship enjoined; but it is worthy of note that opening up the table has taken from Baptists a practice that once helped to reinforce their identity, as the gathered people of Christ.

Having briefly sketched out some of the historical background to current practice, I want to suggest that to remedy this will involve more than helping Baptists find a new way of thinking about the covenantal aspects of the Lord's Supper. Following Stanley Hauerwas and James K. Smith, among others, I want to argue that the embodiment of particular practices helps to shape the identity of the church.¹³ In regards to the Lord's Supper, Smith writes, "In a broken, fragmented world, the church is called to be the first-fruits of a new creation by embodying a reconciled community; and the way we begin to learn that is at the communion table."¹⁴

Smith understands the Lord's Supper as normative for the church, in that it is here that we become the body of Christ, bound together in love, and kept together by continually working out with one another what it means to forgive and to be forgiven. As such, I think that as Baptists we need to reimagine *how* we practice the Lord's Supper, because what we are currently doing undermines whatever else we might want to say is going on. We need to challenge the pragmatism that's come to dominate our practice because the way we do things is not neutral; it is shaping the people that we are.

In *Worship and Christian Identity: Practicing Ourselves*, E. Byron Anderson asks the question "How does faith get into our bodies?"¹⁵ He picks up the work of social anthropologist Paul Connerton, who identifies 3 processes that constitute what he calls "the rhetoric of re-enactment", calendrical repetition, verbal

¹⁰ Blyth, "A Sign of Unity," 132-133.

¹¹ Walker, *Baptists at the Table*, 197. Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries*, 191.

¹² Walker, *Baptists at the Table*, 45-65.

¹³ See for example, Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

¹⁴ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 202.

¹⁵ E. Byron Anderson, *Worship and Christian Identity: Practicing Ourselves* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 59.

repetition, and gestural repetition¹⁶. In summary what Anderson says is that we get faith into our bodies by practices that are repeated at regular intervals (weekly, monthly and so on), by practices that repeat the same words, and by practices that repeat the same gestures or movements. Thus for the Lord's Supper, how often we celebrate, how familiar the words are that we use, and the gestures that are part of what we do, will all shape the way that the Lord's Supper forms us as God's people.

When it comes to gestures, Anderson makes the observation that, while the liturgies that we are currently producing for the Lord's Supper are putting a greater emphasis upon thanksgiving, by not addressing what he calls "incorporating practices", such as bowing our heads or kneeling, what we do will continue to speak more of penitence than it will of joyful gratitude¹⁷. What people are doing in Baptist services of the Lord's Supper, sitting in rows, being served, taking a single cup, and what we are not doing, such as sharing the peace, these things are, I believe, significantly shaping the kind of people we are. However much we might talk of this being a communion meal, one we share together, our actions say otherwise, and we betray any sense that we are the body of Christ.

With this in mind consider these comments from a couple of the follow-up interviews. I repeat them verbatim because I think they are telling. In the survey I had asked people to describe the character of the particular Lord's Supper they were completing it for. Was it celebratory, or sombre, or something else? This first respondent had opted for other and written "Somewhere between celebratory and sombre", so in the interview I asked what that meant. This was the response: "I think I make it a celebration and the congregation think it's sombre... so that's why it's always somewhere in between. [Here I asked a couple of clarifying questions: what do you do to try and make it a celebration?; and how do they make it more sombre?] It's tone... my tone 'this is a good thing, this is a place to rejoice at,' and they don't smile."

This second respondent had chosen celebratory. So in the interview I asked why and if that was how the congregation would have described that occasion. They said this:

I think I would use the word because I'm wanting people to sort of recognise and celebrate what Jesus has done for us. So, although there's a sense of remembering the pain and the suffering up on the cross, I think always the connection for me is that three days later the resurrection aspect. Interestingly when we did a review... we did a bit of a conversation with our teenagers a few... this is probably a couple of years ago, and this is maybe how the congregation perceived it, they, one of the children, or a couple of them, said when they'd been into communion, they said sometimes they felt like the atmosphere changed and became a lot more sober, which I thought was an interesting observation. I think probably some of that is because we get a little bit more formal ... we're quite an informal church in the way that we do Sunday mornings, but I think when we do communion we tend to be a little bit more, not ... we will use liturgy sometimes but we will have our own particular

¹⁶ Ibid., 76.

¹⁷ Ibid., 78-79. He describes incorporating practices as "those which impart messages by means of the current bodily activity of the sender or senders, by performance." He further argues that our focus on the writing of liturgical texts (an inscribing practice because it seeks to fix in place the meaning of an event) means that "the incorporating practices of the community at worship remain largely unaddressed."

set phraseologies that we go through, so that it can be a little bit more formal... and maybe that's what they're picking up. I think sometimes the congregation doesn't enter into that as much perhaps as I would like or we would like and it can feel a little more serious and sober...

Curtis Freeman writes, "For many Baptists, the Lord's Supper is a matter of individual piety. If individualism is the sickness of Baptist life, the antidote is healing grace that in part lies in recovering a sense of the Lord's Supper as an act of common prayer."¹⁸ If Anderson is right then that recovery will require Baptists to introduce gestures and movements into their celebrations of the Lord's Supper that intentionally turn the believer away from a moment of private devotion, and towards those brothers and sisters in Christ who have come to the table with her. Now I am not trying to argue that there is a dichotomy here, that it should be either personal devotion or common prayer, but that our current practice leans so much in one direction that we need to redress the balance and introduce gestures and movements that turn us back towards one another. The regular and repeated practice of sharing the peace is a gesture that could in time encourage Baptists to recognise the horizontal as well as the vertical aspect of the covenant that Jesus' death and resurrection have made possible. Such a practice is consistent with the idea that the Lord's Supper is a "re-membling" of the body of Christ, which makes it ironic that the pattern in *Gathering for Worship* that takes this name does not include it.

If we are going to do this then there a number of obstacles that we'll need to overcome. One of these is a dissonance between ministers and their congregations, which is hinted at in the first respondents comment above. We might persuade ministers, and indeed I think we're already seeing a sacramental turn towards recognising Christ's presence at the table, but I don't think it's there in the churches. I also think we'll need to find ways to overcome what Keith Jones highlights as the problem with our physical spaces¹⁹. Historically they've been set up for pulpits and oratory, for choirs and music, and more recently for worship groups on a platform, but they've never been set up for the table. And then thirdly I think we'll need to deal with the challenge posed by the limited amount of time we give to the Lord's Supper in our services.

These are initial thoughts rather than firm conclusions and my main aim has been simply to ask the question, Do Baptists need to reimagine *how* they celebrate the Lord's Supper? I think we do and I think we need to if we're going to find ways to bring these absent friends back to the table.

[In response to this paper the observation was made that there are three moments that are fairly common in Baptist churches when they share the Lord's Supper that do get us toward the communal aspect. These were: receiving new members immediately prior to celebrating the Supper; a time of pastoral prayer, particularly focussed on the local fellowships needs; the retaining of the individual cups so that everyone drinks at the same time, with the point often made that this is the sign of our fellowship in Christ. While I think all these are valid ways of encouraging the corporate aspect of our coming to the table, I am not aware

¹⁸ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, 321.

¹⁹ Jones, *A Shared Meal*, 27-28.

of any gesture or movement taking place, and I suspect that in most cases it is still the minister who welcomes the new members or leads the pastoral prayers.]