

21) The Church, Part 4

In the Presbyterian Church, when a minister is ordained, they are ordained to “the ministry of Word and Sacraments.” While “Word” represents the primary focus of worship which is preaching, and especially preaching on scripture, “Sacraments” represents a series of ritual actions where there is much diversity within the churches of Christendom.

1) To begin with, what is a sacrament? The word itself is Latin, and from where the word “sacred” also comes. A sacrament is a ritual that is intended to impart divine grace upon the recipient. For some churches the divine grace (the love of God) imparted is tied to something primarily tangible (like bread, wine, or water that are blessed or “consecrated”). For other churches, the divine grace is something much more experienced in heart and spirit rather than tied to any physical substance.

There are historical and theological reasons for this. Focusing on the physical items ties the sacrament to the church and the authorized administrator (priest or minister), making the recipient more dependent on the church for legitimacy. Focusing on the spiritual experience widens access to the sacrament of divine grace to anyone, anywhere, regardless of whether there is an ordained person in a church administering it. It’s all about the experience and that depends on how the person receives it more than the qualifications of the person administering it. This also frees the sacrament from church control for legitimacy.

We as Presbyterians have always been somewhere in the middle between more church dependent views (Roman Catholic & Orthodox) and more singularly experiential views (e.g. Baptist & Pentecostal). The occasion, the moment, the place, and having an ordained minister administering the sacrament matter to us, as does the presence of a community (even two or three gathered together) and the use of specific words led by one who understands the background and the historical liturgy all the way back to the bible. At the same time, however, unless each person experiences the sacrament for themselves and within themselves as a moment of divine grace received, it has little meaning or effect in and of itself. Unless the Spirit passes through us and is felt within us as individual persons before God, a sacrament is of little benefit.

2) What are the sacraments? Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians recognize seven sacraments, intended to engage people at key moments from birth to death. They are: baptism, Holy Communion, Confirmation, Reconciliation (confession), anointing of the sick, marriage and ordination. While we Protestants recognize the unique spiritual value of all these moments and rituals in many a person’s spiritual life, we recognize only two of these officially as sacraments. Why? Because only two of these are mentioned in the bible as instituted by Christ himself for all Christians to receive. Baptism is initiation into Christian community and the body

of Christ done once in a lifetime. Holy Communion was instituted by Jesus at a last supper he ate with his disciples to serve as a memorial of his death to be repeated regularly as a means to spiritual renewal within community.

3) Baptism: There are a range of views on Baptism within Christianity. While every church believes baptism should be done once, all churches do not believe every baptism done in a church is legitimate. Baptists, Pentecostals, Mennonites and most Evangelical churches believe baptism should only be administered to adults who profess their faith in God, through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostals in particular also believe that baptism of the Holy Spirit should follow baptism with water, and often, adults who are baptized profess their faith by also speaking in tongues (as happened in the early church). This is an interpretation that is very literal and linear (Spirit baptism as a separate experience following water baptism and having to involve tongue-speaking (whatever that means exactly)). The apostle Paul, for one, found the expectation of tongue-speaking more a problem than a benefit. Love is what matters as the sign of the Spirit filling our hearts (1 Corinthians 13).

We as Presbyterians also welcome the baptism of babies and children as much as adults because we follow the narrative of the early church in the Acts of the Apostles which tells of whole households being baptized together. This includes infants and children along with the adults. Inclusion and welcome into the body of Christ should not exclude children of professing believers. Later in life children who become adults can confirm baptismal vows taken by parents or guardians on their behalf through profession of faith. At Armour Heights we enjoy the privilege of administering multiple baptisms every year of infants, children and adults.

4) Holy Communion: Here there has been considerable debate and conflict within Christendom as to the meaning. Everyone agrees that we should use the symbols of bread and wine (or juice) for Holy Communion, but everyone does not agree on:

1. Does the bread and wine remain simply bread and wine upon consecration by prayer? Or do they actually become converted into the literal body and blood of Christ (Roman Catholic “transubstantiation”) sacrificed anew, or his actual presence without being literally converted into his body (Lutheran “consubstantiation” and Anglican “Real Presence”). On the other end of the spectrum, Baptists, Pentecostals, Mennonites and others believe the actual physical symbols matter little and it’s all about the experience of remembering Christ in the last supper.

We Presbyterians believe Christ actually becomes present in Spirit, and as we eat and drink the physical symbols we are taking in Christ in a special and unique way where he can continue to grow, heal and shape us. We also believe that it strengthens our togetherness as a communion of faith when we eat and drink Christ together.

So then, Christ is truly present every time we celebrate and partake of Holy Communion, but it is a spiritual presence and what matters most is how deeply we imbibe Christ and welcome his transforming influence in our lives.

2. Does it matter who administers Holy Communion? Once again, for Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans and Anglicans, it matters very much that it is an authorized and ordained person administering the sacrament to recipients who receive it in humble faith. On the other end are those more 'congregationalist' churches (like Baptists, etc...) for whom Holy Communion is simply a memorial of Christ and can be administered and celebrated anywhere, anytime and by any leader who is a professed Christian. What matters is how each individual receives the sacrament within.

We as Presbyterians officially require an ordained minister to administer the sacrament, but the location and context are quite flexible, and the focus is on the sincerity of the receiving and the experience of Christ moving into hearts through the Spirit. More recently the Presbyterian Church in Canada has ruled that elders can administer Holy Communion in certain cases where an ordained minister cannot be present and permission has been granted through the Presbytery. We welcome this opening of options so that the sacrament is celebrated more regularly for more people in Christian community.

Personally, I would welcome wider flexibility in the celebration of Holy Communion so that it is not tied so exclusively to an ordained minister administering it. However, background in understanding, reverence in the sharing of the elements and a focus on teaching celebrants the meaning of the sacrament and how to receive it, requires some care and attention for anyone taking on the invitation to lead in sharing the sacrament with others. What do you think?

Always so much more to say, but we'll end here for now. Please send me your questions as they arise. Hathan1964@hotmail.com