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A table of contents for *Christian Brethren Review* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_christian-brethren-review.php

WORSHIP AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

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In Brethren churches there has always been a close connection between worship and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This connection is so close that, for many Brethren, worship is virtually synonymous with the Breaking of Bread. A description of Brethren practices and some consideration of the historical circumstances that surrounded their origin in the last century will help to explain the way their tradition was shaped and formed.

BRETHREN AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

Many of the founders of the Brethren movement were ordained or preparing for ordination.¹ They found themselves prevented by ecclesiastical tradition and denominational rigidities from sharing fellowship with other believers and expressing this fellowship by breaking bread together. Those contemplating missionary work found that, if not ordained, they could even be prevented from breaking bread with the fruit of their own evangelism. The Lord's Supper which should have been the focus of Christian unity had become the occasion of division.

They wrestled with this problem, as many others have. As a result of deep heart searching and a re-evaluation of the scriptures, they broke out of their spiritual straightjacket on discovering that the New Testament did not make the ordinance dependent on the presence of a validly ordained individual. They could express Christian fellowship and be united around the Lord's Table without waiting on any man for authority or recognition. The necessary authority stemmed directly from the Lord's command and recognition depended only on him.

The effect of this discovery was electrifying. They were able to meet together from different denominational backgrounds without inhibition.

The sense of freedom and the release of spiritual power that flowed from this discovery drew many to their gatherings. Having thrown aside the restrictions of clerical ordination they acknowledged as far as their own ministry was concerned that they exercised it 'on the nomination of my Lord by his Spirit'.

It was a small step from this position to the rediscovery of the role of spiritual gifts within the assembly. (They rejected, however, the use of the ecstatic gifts which they came to regard as no longer available to the church.) These spiritual gifts needed opportunity for their free exercise in ministry and worship. Where more natural to exercise them but at the Lord's Table?

The hallmarks of the early gatherings of Brethren were:

- 1 An open table—at which all believers in good standing were received.
- 2 The dismantling of clerical differentiations and freedom to break bread together without requiring authority or authorised administration.
- 3 The abandoning of a liturgical approach to worship and the practice of open worship associated with the Breaking of Bread.

The result was to establish a new pattern for gatherings of believers. It has been the general practice of Brethren to meet each Sunday morning for worship and the Breaking of Bread. The 'morning meeting' as it became known, was and still remains, unique to assemblies of Brethren.² In the morning meeting there was firmly established a close link between worship and the Breaking of Bread. Although it would not be suggested that corporate worship could not take place without breaking bread, this ordinance is undoubtedly seen as the normal, natural and primary context for the worship of the assembled church.

NEW TESTAMENT PRACTICE

Brethren would undoubtedly contend that their practice reflects the emphasis of the New Testament church. One must ask, however, to what extent this connection between worship and the Lord's Supper is supported by New Testament practice. A study of this question throws light on the ordinance itself and suggests appropriate contexts for its celebration.

In four verses in 1 Corinthians, Paul describes a simple series of actions and words of the Lord Jesus at the Last Supper (11:23–26). The ordinance which these verses describe has been given a number of names including Holy Communion, The Eucharist, the Lord's Supper and the Breaking of Bread. Brethren have typically referred to it by the last two of these, the Lord's Supper and the Breaking of Bread. All of these names have a basis

in the New Testament or in the ordinance itself. (See Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 10:16, 21; 11:20, 24.)

'The Breaking of Bread' and its equivalent 'to break bread' are interesting terms. It is not always clear that they refer necessarily or only to the ordinance itself. They occur a number of times in the New Testament, and are the most frequent designation for the ordinance. The slight uncertainty of reference is a reminder that the early church seems frequently and perhaps typically to have 'broken bread' in the context of a communal meal (see Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Cor 11:20-34). There is a similar breadth of reference in the single New Testament usage of the term 'The Lord's Supper' which encompasses the common meal within which the Corinthians celebrated the ordinance (1 Cor 11:20).

This conjunction of the ordinance with a meal is a reflection of the original circumstances in which the ordinance was instituted. The Last Supper was the final occasion before his death on which the Lord Jesus spent an evening with the disciples and shared a meal with them.

The Last Supper was not simply an opportunity for fellowship with close associates. It was also a Passover meal. It combined a formal meal with a structured religious liturgy including elements of worship. The courses of the meal were interspersed with prayers, thanksgiving and praise, singing and the recitation and exposition of scripture.

This ordered sequence had a number of purposes. The whole meal was in part a re-enactment of the original circumstances of the Passover. It was designed to remind the participants of God's saving acts when he brought their forefathers out of Egypt and as a result of which they became his people. The specifically religious elements provided an opportunity for a response of praise and worship to the remembrance of what God had done in the past. The ceremony was designed to educate all those present, and especially children, in the significance of the meal.

The Passover was celebrated nationally in Jerusalem. The lamb was ritually slaughtered in the temple, but the meal and its associated ceremonies were not part of the temple worship. These were celebrated in small groups usually within the extended family. In this intimate circle the formality of the occasion was considerably softened. Even a cursory reading of the gospel accounts show that the Last Supper shared this informal character. Little of the Passover ritual remains in the record but the intimate atmosphere is made abundantly clear especially in John's Gospel. The circumstances of the foot washing; the questioning and conversations; the Lord's extended but intensely personal instruction of his disciples: all graphically depict an intimate occasion. Twice during the evening, first towards the beginning of the meal, and then at the end, our Lord departed from the normal course of events and in so doing instituted what we now recognise as a single ordinance.

The apostles continued, after the ascension, the table fellowship they had experienced with the Lord both before his crucifixion and after his resurrection. The special importance of what he had done at the Last Supper was quickly recognised. His command to repeat it was obeyed and observed, probably daily (Acts 2:42, 46). There could be nothing more natural than to remember him by breaking bread as they enjoyed table fellowship together. This was made especially easy as they were continuing the communal life they had enjoyed together for the past few years. Under these circumstances it was also natural that, under the guidance of the apostles, the table fellowship of the early Jerusalem church should follow the pattern of the Last Supper and be accompanied by prayer, praise, teaching from Scripture and holy conversation (Acts 2:42).

This immediate practice seems to have been modified later by the circumstances of time and place. With the recognition of the first day of the week as the regular occasion for Christian gatherings, the celebration of the ordinance probably became a weekly occurrence, but the character of the gatherings continued, combining a fellowship meal, the Breaking of Bread, worship and Christian instruction (Acts 20:7–12). Such gatherings provided the opportunity for many of the New Testament letters to be first read to the assembled believers to whom they were addressed.

Although one cannot be certain how the gathering described in 1 Corinthians 14 was related to the supper described in 1 Corinthians 11, there is every reason to suppose that it formed part of the same gathering. It is perhaps relevant that the gifts of prayer and prophecy which are discussed in the verses in chapter 11 immediately prior to the discussion of the supper are also the principal gifts discussed in chapter 14. The exercise of spiritual gifts would be both natural and appropriate at such a gathering and some of the comments in chapter 14 are particularly relevant to the Breaking of Bread (nb vv 16–17). In view of the general practice it seems probable that they were part of the gathering referred to generally by the apostle by the repeated phrase ‘when you come together’. (1 Cor 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34; 14:19, 23, 26).

Within the period covered by the New Testament, one can see some signs of modifications in this practice. Reference has already been made to a change from daily to weekly observance. An important development was the bringing together of the two parts of the ordinance—the bread and the cup. At the Last Supper these had been separated by most of the Passover meal. Having been brought together, the ordinance became a distinct part of the fellowship meal. From Paul’s description of the ordinance it would seem that this had already happened by the time of Paul’s conversion and certainly by the time of his arrival in Corinth and the beginning of his mission there (1 Cor 11:23). Later, in sub-apostolic times, the fellowship meal became separated from the ordinance altogether. This was perhaps

due in part to the type of abuse which Paul seeks to correct in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:20, 22, 34).

There were some occasions when believers came together for a particular purpose as, for example, when they met to pray regarding the crisis arising from the imprisonment of Peter and John (Acts 12:5,12). But the general impression is that, in New Testament times, there was no clear distinction by time or place between fellowship at a common meal, breaking bread, praise and worship and teaching. The emphasis is upon a synthesis of spiritual exercise at a single gathering rather than the segregation which subsequently became typical.

THE SUPPER AND WORSHIP

New Testament practice shows a close association between the Lord's Supper and the various other expressions of the corporate life of the church, including worship. Brethren practice was formed and moulded by historical circumstances seen in the light of New Testament practice. If the ordinance is considered in this light, one can establish whether the conjunction of worship and the Lord's Supper is a casual connection or whether it derives from the character of the ordinance itself. If the latter is true, the ordinance will influence the character of the worship with which it is associated. One can also consider whether there are features of the Lord's Supper which make it particularly appropriate as a context for corporate worship.

There are undoubtedly a number of aspects of the Lord's Supper which make it a powerful stimulus to the corporate worship of the church. Paul's account in 1 Corinthians 11 records that, on two occasions, before the bread was broken and before the cup was drunk, our Lord gave thanks. Embedded within the ordinance, therefore, is a twice repeated expression of thanksgiving to God (Mark 14:22-23). This may have been understood initially by the disciples in part as thanks for the provision in God's providence of the bread and wine. But in retrospect it was quickly perceived to have a deeper significance. The meaning of the loaf and cup are clearly expressed in the words of institution. It is the understanding of this meaning by believers which results in thanksgiving.

Such thanksgiving follows the examples of the Lord himself. It is made mandatory by his injunction 'do this' and it is found at the very centre of the ordinance. The broken bread and poured out cup, which speak so eloquently of the sacrificial death of the Lord for his people, are placed firmly in a setting of praise and thanksgiving. So important was this seen to be that in the early centuries of the church the ordinance was called 'The Thanksgiving' ('The Eucharist'). Any setting of the Lord's Supper

which ignores this truth seriously distorts the ordinance. Following our Lord's example, we bring our thanksgiving to the Father for the person and work of the Son. This is only possible as we come in the fullness of the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:18–20).

The ordinance is not simply a stimulus to private thanksgiving. It is essentially a communal act which cannot be celebrated by an individual believer. It brings believers together. The loaf must be broken, the cup poured out, and both shared among the assembled company. To take is to share with and to identify oneself with both the Lord and the other believers present. To break bread is a symbol of fellowship and is an act expressing the presence and reality of the local church.

The ordinance is not only a corporate act. It is also intended to be a public act. Paul says that it is a declaration and proclamation of the essential Christian gospel. He writes, 'as often as you eat the bread and drink the cup you proclaim the Lord's death' (1 Cor 11:26). We proclaim his death not simply as a fact of history. The ordinance makes clear its vicarious nature, its saving power, and that we are the grateful recipients in Christ of his salvation. Peter asserts that the role of the Lord's people is to be a worshipping people and that they fulfil that function by declaring his wonderful deeds (1 Pet 2:29). The proclamation of God's saving acts is an essential element of worship. If to break bread together is to make such a declaration, then it is also to engage in an act of worship. Furthermore, in this action the church expresses its purpose and fulfills its highest calling.

The proclamation is not confined to a statement regarding the Lord's death. Paul writes, 'you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes'. The clear implication is that an essential part of the proclamation is the assertion of his resurrection, present exaltation and future return. The bread and wine remind the believer of a living Lord Jesus. The bread which we break is a communion with a living and life-giving Lord (1 Cor 10:16). The Lord who is proclaimed is the one who declares of himself, 'I am the Living One: I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!' (Rev 1:18).

There are a number of New Testament indications that point to the Lord's Supper as providing in some way a revelation of Christ to the believer. The Lord himself promised that when two or three are gathered together in his name he would be present with them (Mark 18:20). No one can doubt that this promise applies to a gathering of the Lord's people around his table. He commanded us to do this 'in remembrance of me'. (1 Cor 11:24–25). Faithful obedience to that command in the company of the Lord's people brings him powerfully before the mind's eye.

The Pauline comment 'until he comes' is a reminder of a joyful and blessed expectation. The atmosphere of thanksgiving and joy to which

reference has already been made is consistent with the fact that this is 'The Lord's Supper'—a feast. It sprang from a feast and it points forward to a feast. Indeed the supper is, in a measure, an anticipation of that longed for occasion.

As we look forward to his coming again and anticipate the joy of the heavenly supper, we also remember that he is present at the feast as the host.

What food luxurious loads the board
 When at his table sits the Lord.
 The wine how rich, the bread how sweet
 When Jesus deigns the guests to meet.³

When believers come together as the body of Christ around his table and fulfil their divinely appointed role in the power of the Holy Spirit, it is not surprising that he becomes manifest. If the presence of God is manifest to an unbeliever when believers assemble, it is to be expected that believers themselves will be powerfully aware of the presence of their Lord (1 Cor 14:25). Worship is the natural response of the redeemed soul to the presence of the redeemer. Surely those who break bread in accordance with the Lord's command and who find him present with them will fall down in worship and adoration.

In all these ways breaking bread is a powerful stimulus to worship. At its centre is thanksgiving and joy. The bread and cup testify to the saving acts from which we personally benefit and for which we give thanks. The act itself is an act of worship which fulfills the divinely ordained role for the church. In fulfilling this role the assembly becomes the vehicle for a revelation of the Lord to itself and to the world.

In view of the powerful theological character of the Lord's Supper one would expect any activity of the church which is brought into close relationship with it to be strongly influenced both as to content and conduct. That this is indeed so can be seen from the apostle's discussion of the way in which the Corinthian assembly conducted the fellowship meal which they associated with the Breaking of Bread (1 Cor 11:20-34). So inappropriate was their behaviour that the apostle could comment, 'it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat' (v 20). A number of general lessons can be drawn from this passage and applied to worship in the context of the Lord's Supper.

There is a distinction between corporate and personal worship which needs to be clearly understood. Corporate worship is not simply simultaneous personal worship where each individual worships without intelligent interaction with the others present. Corporate worship is the worship of the body *as a body*. Unity of thought and expression in worship is achieved, not by an imposed liturgy but by the intelligent and free

expression of the individual members of the body exercising their gifts in the fullness of the Spirit and interacting with one another and with the whole church.

Worship so generated expresses the corporate nature of the church as a free association of individual members bound together by a common bond with their head and upbuilding themselves in a common life. Such worship will have a greater scope and depth than the personal worship of a single individual. The breath of understanding and experience of the Lord possessed by the whole church is available to inform and enrich the worship. This can be brought to bear by the Spirit using all the gifts available. This is of course only possible where there is freedom for the exercise of these gifts. It is this added scope and depth to worship which makes 'the morning meeting', at its best, a treasured experience for those who worship in Brethren churches.

The character of the ordinance set limits for the Corinthian church to the character of the meal with which it was associated. The ordinance performed a controlling function (vv 21, 22, 33). If this was ignored, there was a serious danger of destroying the ordinance (v 20). It ceased to be a meaningful celebration. Similarly, breaking bread performs an important controlling function on any associated worship. It does this by focusing the worship and by providing limiting boundaries for it. This is particularly important where the worship is open and liberty can easily be abused. It focuses the worship by bringing the attention of the assembled church to the meaning of the ordinance itself and by the necessity to perform the acts which constitute the ordinance. It sets a boundary to the worship by excluding anything which cannot be encompassed within the meaning and purpose of the ordinance.

However, it is essential to identify carefully the focal point and where the boundary lies. The Lord Jesus made his intention quite clear when he said, 'Do this in remembrance of me.' The ordinance is to be celebrated in remembrance of him; the bread is to be broken and eaten in remembrance of him. The cup is to be drunk in remembrance of him. There is no qualification or restriction in these words. It is the fullness of the person and work of Christ that is the object of remembrance and it is the fullness of the person and work of Christ that is the subject of Christian worship.

There is no restriction of topic or time—so long as it is related to Christ—who is the eternal word, the alpha and omega; in whom, through whom and for whom all things were created; and who is the beginning, the first born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. (John 1:1-3; Rev 1:17; Col 1:16-18). The person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ provide the whole subject matter of Christian worship and it is this upon which the attention of worshipping believers is concentrated. With such a restriction there is an endless source of inspiration for true

worship and there is a constantly renewed source of freshness. His riches are unsearchable and his praise eternal.

Amongst some Brethren there is a feeling that the worship associated with the Lord's Supper should be more restricted than this and should concentrate on the death of our Lord. They feel that other aspects of truth should be excluded from worship on such an occasion. This attitude, which can express itself in positively disruptive ways, involves a misunderstanding of the ordinance itself and a serious diminishing of the person of our Lord. We come to remember him. And as we remember him it is the living Christ who is present. We cannot deny the cross but we must not restrict our remembrance of him to such a narrow compass. Those who fear that without this restriction the worship of the church will lack focus do not take proper account of the influence of the ordinance itself. There is no doubt that worship, when associated with breaking bread, is inevitably focused on the person and work of the Lord Jesus. This is all the restriction that is necessary.

Nevertheless, when we come together, the Spirit often does direct the thoughts of the church to some particular aspect of his person and work. Such a theme is to be treated with respect, but it is important not to become bound by the idea that there *must* be a theme. If there is a theme it should develop as the occasion proceeds and should result in the expression of thanksgiving and praise. This in itself is a liberating ministry.

Both New Testament practice and the theological meaning of the Lord's Supper confirm that worship is necessarily associated with the Breaking of Bread. Such worship must reflect the corporate nature of the church as the body of Christ. To this extent scripture supports the Brethren tradition. But, as other essays in this review show, this is not to say that worship is to be confined to what takes place around the Lord's Table.

Footnotes

- 1 See F Roy Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement* (Paternoster Press 1968) 15-35.
- 2 For a description of a morning meeting see: Peter Cousins, *The Brethren*. Christian Denominations Series. (The Religious Education Press 1982).
- 3 From the hymn 'Amidst us our Beloved stands' by C H Spurgeon.