

THE LORD'S SUPPER AND EVANGELISM

"I look to find Thee in Thy Word, or at Thy Table meet"

THE Lord's Supper has little meaning for many modern Christians. I am convinced that this is partly because it has been divorced from evangelism, which, to me, means inviting unbaptized and unconfirmed people to seek Christ through all available means of grace. Divorcing the Lord's Supper from evangelism has weakened the sacrament to the extent that some Christians would rather remain at home than attend church on Communion Sunday. The problem of making the Lord's Supper relevant in today's world does not lie with methods of administration, but with an inadequate theology.

One example of this can be seen in our attitude toward the sermon. On Communion Sunday we do not have a sermon, but a 'meditation'; at the other extreme, we have used the sermon as part of our evangelistic effort to the exclusion of the Lord's Supper. We seem to believe that the Lord's Supper is for Christians only. In evangelistic services, the sacrament has not been given a place and the sermon is the principal way in which we communicate the gospel. It is my contention that the gospel must be communicated through both Word and Sacrament; and that without the use of the Lord's Supper in evangelism, it will become irrelevant in worship.

The Means of Grace

The Lord's Supper is a 'means of grace'—but not the only means of grace. Certainly we recognize the value of preaching, prayer, Bible reading and church attendance as other means of grace. John Wesley said, "By 'means of grace' I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby He might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace."¹ Before we use any of the above-mentioned 'means of grace' we should be aware of the fact that there is no power in any of them

apart from God. The Lord's Supper has no more power than does preaching and all the other means of grace. Power is only received as God speaks through them.

However, the Lord's Supper has been neglected as a means of grace. It is not only an 'outward sign of an inward grace', but it conveys the 'real presence' of Christ. We should not make the mistake of thinking that the presence of Christ is conveyed through this sacrament alone. The conveyance of the real presence is the work of the Holy Spirit and not the elements themselves, and the Holy Spirit works through all the means of grace. What we must learn to do is use the means of grace ordained by Christ in all parts of our church life. I believe that the two main methods of communicating the gospel are preaching and the Lord's Supper. Thus, the Lord's Supper and evangelism must be united.

Conversion and the Lord's Supper

In the early Methodist movement, conversion occurred at the Lord's Supper as well as in preaching services. Susanna Wesley was converted at the Lord's Supper. John Wesley believed that one single instance of conversion at the Lord's Supper was enough to overthrow the assertion that it is only for believers. He said, "Our Lord commanded those very men who were then unconverted, who had not yet received the Holy Ghost, who (in the full sense of the word) were not believers, to do this 'in remembrance of' Him".²

Why should the Lord's Supper be reserved for those who already believe? What is it that we receive when we participate in the Communion Service? It is my belief that the gospel is communicated to us and that several things happen. There is the awareness of the real presence of Christ, and an accompanying sense of forgiveness and assurance of his love. Should this be kept from those who have not yet been baptized or confirmed? These are the very things that unbelievers need. There are many

people who cannot be classified as believers who would like to believe. We can only call them 'seekers'. Why should they be denied participation in the Lord's Supper? In writing to John Simpson, John Wesley said, "Ought every unbeliever to pray or communicate? Yes, 'Ask and it (faith) shall be given you'. And if you believe Christ died for the guilty, helpless sinners, then eat that bread and drink of the cup."³ I think a careful study of the evangelical revival will reveal that Wesley admitted 'seekers' who were unconfirmed to the Lord's Supper and that he also thought of it as a 'converting ordinance'. It became a powerful instrument of the revival and was thus treated as evangelical.

Some may fear that opening the Communion Table to unbelievers, even if they are seekers, may render the sacrament meaningless or even be a defilement of the Table. I am not advocating the misuse of the Lord's Table, only the opening of it for those who do not yet believe. The reference in I Corinthians 11:27 refers to eating the bread and drinking from the cup in an 'unworthy manner' and not to the unworthiness of the individual. If we had to be worthy, who among us could approach the Table of the Lord? The invitation is to sinners, and that is why it should be included in evangelism.⁴

**Come to the Supper, come;
Sinners, there still is room;
Every soul may be His guest;
Jesus gives the general word;
Share the monumental Feast,
Eat the Supper of your Lord.**

Organizing the Service

Following are a few suggestions as to how the Lord's Supper could be organized to make it more meaningful, but they will mean little if we do not include evangelism as a part of our theology of the Lord's Supper. Furthermore, they are not for an occasional Communion Service held only for devotional reasons. The early church celebrated this sacrament

every week and all the major reformers and the leaders of the evangelical revival urged that both Word and Sacrament be included in the weekly service.

Part of our problem lies in the rigid way in which we adhere to the ritual. Certainly, there are many beautifully written parts, but do we not have the ability to create our own ritual and write our own prayers of confession and consecration? The adaptation of the service of the Lord's Supper to meet the needs of local congregations is necessary. If we can get over this obstacle, we can consider the organization of a service which includes both Word and Sacrament—a full sermon and Communion. Neither should be hurried in order to finish the service within the sacred hour, but I believe the service needs to be kept as simple as possible. So I would lay out the service as follows:

Hymn of Praise
 Prayer of Confession
 Words of Assurance
 Hymn of Assurance
 Scripture Readings
 Presentation of Offerings
 Hymn of Preparation
 The Word (Sermon)
 Prayer of Consecration
 Invitation to Christian Discipleship
 The Sacrament (The Lord's Supper)
 Prayers of Thanksgiving
 Closing Hymn
 Benediction

Preparation for sermon and sacrament is accomplished throughout the entire service. The prayers and hymns are used to prepare the congregation for the climax—the Lord's Supper, to which all are invited. Neither the sermon nor sacrament is tacked on to the end and everything in the service supports these two methods of communication.

Music

The music needs to be mentioned because of the important part it plays in worship. When administering the sacrament to larger congregations, we frequently do not know what to do with those who have already communicated or those waiting for room at the Table. In the past, we have expected them to hold their own private devotions. But I think it would be far better to have the congregation participating through singing appro-

priate hymns while each table is served. When the table is served and the hymn finished, the minister can give an appropriate dismissal. In this way, the congregation has something to do and the administration of the sacrament can go smoothly without being rushed. It might be better if the minister did not say the words of institution as he gives the elements to the people. The congregation would be singing and this should be sufficient. The minister has already had his opportunity to make clear the meaning of the sacrament and now he can let the congregation participate.

A word of warning

Most congregations are not used to having the Lord's Supper every Sunday and are not likely to accept the changes suggested without understanding them. If a church is now having Holy Communion quarterly, it would probably be able to begin celebrating it monthly with little difficulty. This should then be continued for at least a year before attempting to celebrate it more frequently. For the next year, it could be celebrated every other week, and I would hope that by this time the congregation would be asking for the sacrament weekly. The burden of responsibility for making it meaningful to the people is upon the minister. We need not worry about the fact that Methodist ministers move every few years and must start this process all over again. What could be more wonderful than to have a congregation dissatisfied because they are not receiving the sacrament often enough? I believe we can only come to this point as we invite 'seekers' as well as 'believers' to the Table, and as we include both Word and Sacrament in every service of the church.

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- 1 John Wesley. *Forty-Four Sermons*. (London, The Epworth Press, reprinted 1964), p. 136).
- 2 Nehemiah Curnock, Ed. *The Journal of John Wesley*. (London, The Epworth Press, reprinted 1960), II, p. 361
- 3 John C. Bowmer. *The Sacrament of the Lord's supper in Early Methodism*. (London, Dacre Press, 1951), p. 106
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 106

THE METHODIST BOOK ROOM

SERVICE SUSPENDED by Mabel Marsh, published by Carlton Press —\$11.55

This is a book by a missionary who spent many years in Malaya and is now in her eighties. Miss Marsh describes vividly the events of the Japanese Occupation and those leading up to it.

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The Joint Board of Christian Education of Australia and New Zealand have prepared new Sunday School materials for sharing the faith of the church with people of all ages—The Christian Life Curriculum. The FAITH is unchanged, but how to express it better is the aim of this material, which gives scope to local teachers to develop the best ways in their own situation. Additional help offered to teachers is both more extensive and more practical. More teaching aids are provided as basic resources: pictures, charts, posters, song sheets, records and occasionally filmstrips.

Christian Education is designed to contribute to the life of faith—a life of obedience to God in the world. If what is learned is important, it must lead to purposeful living.

The material is undated and may be used again—i.e. the same for 1970, 1972 and 1974 and the following year's (1971) can be used in 1973 and 1975. A revision is intended after six years. If this new plan, which takes many old and familiar features and arranges them in a new manner, is to contribute to new life in our churches, it requires above all else people who are continually being made new men and women by the Spirit of Christ—it is a set of tools to be placed in the hands of people with a faith to share.

Full details have been sent to pastors and Sunday School Superintendents—more information can be obtained from the Methodist Book Room.

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