



THE SACRAMENTS IN SPACE, TIME, AND MATTER

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Once spoke with a Lutheran pastor from India who warmly informed me that he would not hold it against me that I consumed wine at the Lord's table. Puzzled by this gracious forbearance in a fellow member of a church that I have thought at times to be rather too exuberantly in favor of booze, I asked him to explain. We only use grape juice, he answered, and we forbid all forms of alcohol consumption, but I recognize that wine is a legitimate part of your culture so I do not condemn you. Curious, I asked how, exactly, alcohol came to be taboo in his Lutheran church. A surprising story ensued.

When the first missionaries arrived from Britain, my friend said, his Dalit people were being forced by high-caste landowners to work for them all day, every day, without a break. To survive the maltreatment, the Dalits had taken to brewing an intoxicating slurry. It got them through the day but also led to a not insignificant amount of domestic abuse. As the Dalits began to convert to Christianity, the missionaries imposed two laws on them: Sabbath observance and total abstention from alcohol. The overlords were not pleased to lose a day's work but, in a rare case of colonialism actually benefitting the underclass, they were not in a position to argue. Together, a day of rest and sobriety allowed the community to re-form itself, shed its internal violence, and ultimately rise out of extreme poverty.

My Indian friend was the first pastor and college graduate in his family; his own grandparents had endured this kind of abuse. Freedom from alcohol was the exodus of his community from slavery, and it was unthinkable that they would drink it at the table of the Lord. For all that, they did believe that the blood of Christ should come from the

fruit of the vine, although grapes had no historic place in Indian agriculture.

For myself, I had always scoffed at sabbatarianism and teetotaling as legalistic Reformed or Methodist aberrations on the American frontier. But this story changed my eyes: I now saw an indigenously Lutheran appreciation for these two things as life-giving, not party-poopng.

After that conversation I started asking around and discovered that the matter of the sacramental elements gets more complex the farther you travel from the land where Jesus walked. In medieval Iceland, for example, wheat was as foreign as grapes, so both bread and wine had to be imported for the Lord's Supper. Even today, a Greenlandic pastor of Inuit origin told me, she has to place an order for an entire year's supply of communion wine, as the snow and ice make deliveries impossible most of the year. Certain other Inuit and Yupik groups have learned to avoid baptism with water—immersion for sure, but even sprinkling—because of the dangers of the cold and so have taken to inscribing a cross of seal blood on the forehead instead.

In these northern cases it was still possible to get hold of wine, bread, and water somehow or other. But oftentimes the gospel travels in advance of the usual material accouterments. A pastor from Senegal told me that they initially used a local leaf tea mixed with sugar for the blood of Christ. They have since switched to wine, but he worries about the obstacle it imposes to the overwhelmingly Muslim population, who can't even begin to consider a religion that tolerates alcohol. The Lutherans of Myanmar celebrated their first communions with pounded rice cakes and a drink made from the red leaf of a rose-like

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plant mixed with sugar. From there they “upgraded” to grape juice and finally to wine and wheat bread. In the Amazonian basin of Colombia, tribal eucharists still use arepas and chicha, both made from corn. Is the real physical presence of Christ there in those elements that are not wheat bread or grape wine? How would we know, and what is at stake in answering one way or another?

Among those I have talked to from across the world, there seemed to be a desire to use the same elements that Jesus did: a material tie, the same *thingness* as the Jewish savior used. But there is also no doubt that it means deliberately introducing something foreign, and the difficulties this raises for conversion are, at times, considerable. A Tanzanian pastor thought it better this way—local fermented banana beer would never be received with the same gravity as foreign red wine—but it is hard to imagine the Lord’s Supper ever exercising the same grip on the imagination as the tea ceremony does in Japan, where the population at large remains more resistant to Christian witness than in nearly any other nation. Could a tea eucharist be a helpful stepping stone? Would it be analogous to Bible translations that say “I am the sweet potato of life” for John 6:35 or “Behold the piglet of God who takes away the sin of the world” for John 1:29 in places that have neither bread nor lambs?

We are familiar with cases where emergencies impose their own rules, especially where baptism is concerned. A Malagasy friend reported a case where an infant was baptized with fresh milk because water was three days’ walk away, and milk, after all, contains water. The child survived and a dispute ensued as to whether the child should be “rebaptized” with plain water. The decision was no, but the pastor’s wife now always keeps a bottle of water on hand solely for the purpose of baptizing, not for drinking or washing.

Emergency baptism is one thing, but can there be such a thing as emer-

gency communion? Luther (among many others in the history of the church) didn’t consider communion necessary for salvation, so it wouldn’t ever make sense to “bend the rules” in order to celebrate the Supper in adverse circumstances. But I have heard tell of the sacrament of the altar celebrated in dangerous places of the world, where individual and ecclesial survival was very much in question and the usual elements were not to be had. In Burundi, for instance, around the time that the civil war in neighboring Rwanda was spilling across its own borders, Coca-Cola (of all things) was the only available liquid that was safe

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to drink, so it became the means of grace. Stories also circulate of illicit eucharists in concentration camps during the Second World War con-fected upon a fragment of potato.

These are not new questions. Thomas Aquinas addressed the matter of the matter in baptism and communion in his *Summa Theologica*. Impure water containing particles of dirt or other substances was acceptable for baptism as long as the “nature” of water was retained, so salty sea water could be used, but not distilled rosewater, mud, or presumably milk. Modern chemistry would probably complicate this judgment. In discussion of the eucharist, Thomas entertains the objection that “in many lands bread is not to be found, and in many places wine is not to be found,”

but replies that “[a]lthough wheat and wine are not produced in every country, yet they can easily be conveyed to every land, that is, as much as is needful for the use of this sacrament: at the same time one is not to be consecrated when the other is lacking, because it would not be a complete sacrament.”¹ It’s interesting to note that, already in the thirteenth century, the church required global commerce to get the gospel’s job done.

Canon law is often mocked as fiddling with items of minor importance, likewise liturgical rubrics and the infamous category of “casuistry.” Can God really be impeded by the type of bread we serve, the way we pour the water, the direction that the church faces? Of course not. But since God cannot be stopped in any event when He sets His will about something, it’s not the most helpful sort of argument—the same way “since the universe will eventually collapse into heat death it doesn’t matter if I cheat on my spouse” is not particularly relevant to the case.

We are creatures that are made of stuff, and we live in and among stuff, so what we do with that stuff, and in what way, has tremendous effect upon us. We acknowledge this in safety regulations, in dietary choices, in urban planning. But we can get weird about it when it comes to matters of the church. There is a kind of Christianity that seems to thrive on deliberately defying the rubrics for the sheer love of doing so. It would invoke the Coca-Cola eucharist of Burundi to conclude that matter is immaterial and to advocate the same in the U.S., with potato chips for wafers.

That is not to say that canon law et alia are without problems. There is equally a kind of Christianity that insists there is only one right way to do everything, blissfully deaf to the critiques of the Old Testament prophets and Jesus when the details got the upper hand. The problem with canon law is that it petrifies easily and does not travel well across borders or cen-

turies. It's an old problem: "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:4).² To put it another way, the Second and Third Articles of the Creed travel through the territory of the First Article. The whole planet is God's—not just the promised land—and the gospel is no respecter of growing seasons.

This wide world calls for nimble rubrics (not rigid rubrics or no rubrics at all) that can harness stuff to serve the gospel without hardening into solutions that do the exact opposite of what they intend. Good rubrics reject the law of matter alone, the *ex opere operato* temptation: that as long as the matter is in the right place or order or shape or size or form, the church has done what it needs to do and therefore it "has" the gospel. And good rubrics equally reject the law of spirit alone, the *mente non dente* temptation (from Calvin's advice to consume the Lord's Supper "mentally not dentally"): that as long as the intention or feeling or thought is in the right place, what we do with the matter is utterly irrelevant and quite possibly distracting or misleading.

It would certainly be easier if we could stick with *either matter or spirit* and avoid the sticky situations arising from their conjunction in the sacraments. That would eliminate the problem of crossing cultures and years because the same would always apply on the outside (with the stuff) or on the inside (with the spirit) no matter who you were, where you were, and when you were.

But that is not our lot. We ourselves are both matter and spirit, body and soul, and the sacraments claim the whole of our being. We have to take into account the fact that stuff moves, alters, grows, decays; that meaning shifts and evolves and degenerates and reappears. We have to make judgment calls in a constantly shifting landscape and negotiate them vis-à-vis other judgment calls. At its beautiful best, the coordination of spirit and matter blazes with beauty, power, and conviction. It becomes a compelling witness

to the gospel. Sticking to one or the other results in either rote legalism or dry idealism.

I wonder if our own forms of the sacraments seem as peculiar to foreigners as theirs do to us. Some time ago I read an article about the Cavanaugh Company, the world's largest producer of communion wafers, which is based in Rhode Island.³ They make white flour wafers, though since the 1960s their whole-wheat wafers have sold better because they supposedly taste more like real bread (confirming the suspicion that Americans have no idea what real bread tastes like). Variants are tailor-made depending

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on the denomination: purely wheat and water in flat rounds for Catholics, a bit of added oil in the squares for Southern Baptists. Gluten-free wafers are already available and low-gluten wafers for celiac Catholics are on the way. An appreciative Episcopal priest praised the clean-snapping hosts, avoiding any problem with crumbs. The wafers come in regular thickness or double-thickness, can be embossed with a cross or a lamb, and are advertised as "untouched by human hands." In other words, these best-selling machine-made products are as unlike bread as (in)humanly possible.

Celiacs and alcoholics bear the brunt of the arguments these days.⁴ It

seems to me rather silly to dispute a gluten-free wafer if wafers have been accepted at all, since the force of "one bread, one body" has long since disappeared. Of course, wafers came about centuries ago because of worry over the crumbliness of bread, as if being like bread were a terrible crime for bread to commit, making it inherently unfit matter for the Lord to commend as his body. What was He thinking of?

Some pastors tell of alcoholics who know they can trust the consecrated wine, but it would be uncharitable to force the Sunday celebration into a weekly testing point of every addict's resolve. In any event, arguing about grape juice when shot glasses or even multiple chalices are in use misses the point, much like the dispute over wheatless wafers.

Then again, if misplaced anxiety about germs in the common cup drives people away from the Lord's table, what advantage is gained in sticking to principle? Germs are a real thing, so is backwash, so is the spillability of wine, red stains on white paraments, and the sulfites in our wines that cause an inevitable cough after the sip (and certainly weren't in the cup that the apostles drank from—nor the hard liquor in fortified wines like port). Jesus said "drink" but we often dip. You can do that with liquid. You could also try having communion resemble an actual meal of real bread and wine, but you'd be hard-pressed to pull it off at any but the tiniest of congregations sheerly due to the time involved. It takes a long time to feed a lot of people; that's the reality of it. Stuff is not neat and tidy enough to satisfy the rigorists, and it is not irrelevant enough to indulge the relativists.

The blurry reality of stuff lies behind questions regarding disposal of the sacramental elements. The story goes that during a dialogue meeting, the Lutherans had convinced the Orthodox that they actually did believe in the real physical presence of Christ in the Supper—until an Orthodox poked his head into the sacristy after a Lutheran eucharist and dis-

covered the pastor sticking the unconsumed consecrated wafers back in the box and pouring the wine down the drain. Why should they believe what we say when we don't act on it? Suiting the action to the words is not a matter of theater and ethics only but of the sacraments as well. Luther's own instinct was to do what Christ said to do with the bread and wine—namely, eat and drink them—so as to avoid “scandalous and dangerous questions about when the action of the Sacrament ends.”⁵ So no tabernacling, but no mixing the leftovers in with the unconsecrated stuff, either.⁶

It is a truism that ours is a consumer society. We North Americans are continually gorging on our stuff even while we starve for meaning. The desperate hunger for meaning gets invested in our stuff, aided and abetted by a terrifyingly savvy advertising industry. We sacralize and fetishize everything we can get our hands on, from shoes to cars to perfumes to trinkets to food.

Maybe the call to us is to regard *only* the sacraments as sacramental, *only* the bread and wine and water as things worthy of that level of attention, care, debate, and regard. *LF*

Notes

1. *Summa Theologica* 3.66.3 and 3.74.1, online at <www.newadvent.org/summa> (this and subsequent sites accessed January 15, 2015).

2. Rabbinic Judaism was a response to this very question of how Torah could travel successfully outside the promised land. Even today there are different regulations for observant Jews living within Israel and those living

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elsewhere. Imagine the challenge of the Sabbath in the far north in the summer when the sun never sets!

3. Katie Zezima, “The Bread of Life, Baked in Rhode Island,” *The New York Times* (December 25, 2008): B1. Online at <www.nytimes.com/2008/12/25/business/smallbusiness/25sbiz.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&>. See also the company website, <www.cavanaghco.com>.

4. It has been speculated that the recent boom in celiac disease and other gluten-intolerance disorders is due to the way wheat has been bred and genetically altered for

profit. Alcoholism is certainly a product of social breakdown on many different levels. If we dislike elements other than wheat and wine at the Lord's table, then perhaps the first line of attack ought to be on the health of our food supply and the health of our social networks, not on the rubrics.

5. *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* (Leipzig and Paderborn: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt and Bonifatius, 2013), 55, fn. 47.

6. I confess to being a vigilante consumer of communion leftovers.