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Observing Baptism and the Lord's Supper in Extreme Situations

by

WRF Member Rev. Dr. Rowland S. Ward
Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, Melbourne

In all the discussion on the internet about observing the Lord's Supper in the situation of the Coronavirus, we should spare a thought for believers, particularly in Muslim lands, who have no regular contact with other Christians. They've become Christians through reading or hearing Scripture or Christian messages on the internet but live in situations where there are no other believers. They may experience persecution or imprisonment as they seek to express the faith. They may not even have access to the internet or printed literature and may only have part of the Scriptures. Who would deny that these believers belong to Christ and are part of his church even, if not the church visible? Of course, we may not equate these isolated believers too quickly with the house churches mentioned in the New Testament since in general the implication there is not a gathering of just one family, while many homes in New Testament times might readily accommodate 20, 30 or more people, and all churches were equipped with elders and deacons (Acts 14:23).

It is said that exceptions make for bad law but on the other hand in extraordinary situations extraordinary things may be done. However, does that mean an isolated believer should baptise himself, or that he should have the Lord's Supper observance by himself with or without someone live-streaming the service? I would suggest this displays some misunderstanding of the nature of the sacraments. There is a distinction between 'at home' and 'in the church' (1 Cor 11:18,22) where the church is not referring to a building but to a distinct gathering of the Lord's people.

Baptism most fundamentally is the sign of God's covenant and is properly administered in the context of the visible church by those called to disciple the nations, baptising and teaching them (Matt 28:19-20). Those who believe already have the benefits which are signified and sealed in baptism so baptism itself is not essential to salvation. Baptism's necessity arises not from some inherent efficacy but because of Christ's command. Wilful disobedience to this command is sin, but there is no sin where the failure to be baptised arises without any fault in the person. Such a person belongs to the covenant which is why he or she would be baptised if that were possible.

When we come to the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:20) the essence of the Supper is not whether the bread is leavened or unleavened or whether the fruit of the vine is fermented or unfermented or white or red, or even, in extremity, if it is wine at all. These staples to sustain life are sacramental symbols of Christ who is our life, and serve to aid our communion with the crucified and risen Lord. In the Supper the 'breaking of bread' - an expression used at ordinary meals too - is a significant action but the Supper must not be made a kind of passion play. Rather it points to the result of Christ's self-offering which nourishes our souls for eternal life. It is indeed Commemoration of the once-for-all sacrifice, Communion with the one who has been

raised, and an anticipation in the Consummation in the marriage supper of the Lamb. So we do not celebrate at an altar but at a table which speaks of the fellowship with the One who has reconciled us to God by his death and who is now present with us at the table. That's a key point because it is the context of a meal with the Risen Lord that is an essential element (1 Cor 10:17). Hence it is also termed 'the table of the Lord' (1 Cor 11:27), an occasion on which we share one loaf and a cup for which we give thanks (1 Cor 10:16-17). Indeed, our Reformed fathers rejected the hosts or wafers used in the Mass by Roman Catholics precisely because they were not elements of an ordinary meal.

So it is in the context of the church as the assembly of God's new covenant community that the sacramental meal is observed and God administers his grace to us in a way different from but still subordinate to the Word. In a time like today's pandemic, when what is normal is taken from us by the greater obligation to preserve our own life and that of others, we still have the word of God to which the sacraments are always subordinate. In our homes we may read the Word and look in faith to the Saviour and know his blessing through the Spirit. We may even have live-streamed audio or video messages although these are not a full substitute for our church gathering. How we miss the worship and the fellowship! That we cannot observe the Supper in all its physicality in 'the church' as the gathered people of God is something we should miss just as we miss the regular worship services. If we cannot feast with the Lord in this manner we must accept his providence; meanwhile we fast and long for the coming of a renewal of the gathered fellowship.

In many places around the world there are small gatherings of a few families without their own pastor and one could certainly contemplate one of the elders, although not ordained as a minister of word and sacrament, being commissioned to administer the Supper even as he may also be preaching as he is able. These are provisions that aim to maintain in exceptional circumstances the essence of church life. But to have a situation where outside the visible church sacraments are administered by those not called to office is perhaps well-intentioned but downplays the Biblical teaching in this area. Rather let us be more conscious of our loss when we cannot gather together than upon insisting on or justifying an individualism by doing our own thing in a way that pays insufficient regard to Christ's institutions and the gathered community of the redeemed. And let us look forward to the promise of Matthew 26:29!