

Efficacy and Ritual Performance:

How the Administration of the Sacraments Affects What They Actually Accomplish

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What does the Lord intend to accomplish in the administration of the Sacraments? What ought we to receive by means of Baptism and the Lord's Supper? We all confess the same answer: nothing less than "Christ and the benefits of the new covenant" (WSC Q. 92). But we reject the notion that the sacraments convey these gifts *ex opera operato*, so we all know that sometimes what the Lord intends to accomplish by means of the sacraments is not actually accomplished. Why not? Two answers come to us easily. First, God is sovereign and not bound to these rituals. He may normally work through the sacraments, but he, by his Spirit, can work around them or beside them if he so chooses. Second, Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to *believers*. The sacraments are an effectual means of salvation "in them that *by faith* receive them" (WSC Q. 91). So if the Lord's Supper, for example, does not accomplish what God intends, then it may be because of God's sovereign design or it may be because the communicants lack faith. Efficacy depends, for our part, on the faithful reception of the Supper. No faith, no benefits. True enough. But do these two answers tell the whole story? What if *the way we do* the sacraments, the way the Supper is performed and then experienced is a major part of the problem? What if Christian people are hindered from a faithful reception of all the gifts God intends to give at his Table because we pastors and elders are not being attentive to the proper manner in which the Supper is to be performed? It is this third option that I would like to explore with you this morning.

Let's begin with the story Cain and Abel, and of the first human-led ritual sacrifice recorded in the Scriptures. According to Genesis 4:3-5, "And it came to pass at the end of days

that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to Yahweh. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And Yahweh had regard for Abel and his offering, but He did not regard Cain and his offering.”

Both brought offerings, but Abel offered “fatty portions of the first fruits of his flock” and Cain offered some of the fruits of the soil. The Lord looked favorably on Abel and his offering. Not so for Cain and his offering. So what is happening here?

To “bring an offering to Yahweh” suggests erecting an altar and placing one’s offering on the altar. In context, what may be happening here is that Cain and Abel come to the entrance of the Garden of Eden, where the Cherubim with flaming swords are stationed, and in turn lay their offerings on an altar. Perhaps fire from the cherubim would have come out and consumed the sacrifice (Leviticus 9, 2 Chronicles 7). Or not.

In whatever way the brothers knew the Lord’s posture toward them and their gifts, the bigger question is: why was Abel’s offering accepted and Cain’s not? There have been all sorts of answers given to that question. But the interpretation most common in our tradition is that the difference between the two had little or nothing to do with the gifts they offered, but with their internal, heart attitude. Abel had faith, Cain did not.

That analysis is mostly correct, but it doesn’t go quite far enough. According to Hebrews 11:4, “*By faith* Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that *he was righteous*, God testifying of his [Abel’s] gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks.” Abel was righteous by faith and therefore the Lord accepted his offering. That being said, it is still the case that *the offerings themselves* were important indicators of the faith or faithlessness of these two worshippers. Not only does the author of Hebrews tell us that Abel was righteous and offered his gifts by faith, he also says that, “God

testified of his gifts.” Abel’s faith led him to offer the right gift, to do the ritual sacrifice in the right way. Cain’s lack of faith worked itself out in a casual disregard for, or maybe even a high-handed rebellion against the proper ritual order of sacrificial gifts.

Typically we evangelicals don’t see the connection between faith and the careful observance of God’s appointed rituals. Let us pose the question this way: Could Cain had offered his grain offering in faith? Answer: No. Not without *first* offering a blood sacrifice. Could Abel have offered a grain offering by faith? No. Faith would never have moved him to do such a thing, at least not until he had first slain an animal for the altar. Abel’s offering was accepted because by faith he offered the proper gifts; he performed the rite according to the Lord’s instruction.

The puritan John Owen is surely correct: “Cain considered God only as Creator and Preserver, but had no respect unto sin, or the way of deliverance from it revealed in the first promise; whereas the faith of Abel was fixed on God, not only as Creator, but as Redeemer also, as him who, in infinite wisdom and grace had appointed the way of redemption by sacrifice and atonement.” Owen rightly points out that Abel’s offering was by “death and blood.” The way of atonement was by blood, the blood of the promised Seed. We learn later when all of this is explicitly laid down for Israel at Mt. Sinai, that what we call a “grain offering” (*minchah*) must be offered *on top* of blood, *after* the death of an animal. Blood first, then grain. First propitiation through the death of a substitute, then the work of one’s hands. Faith believes and follows this ritual order.

But there is more. This primeval Sabbath worship service also has a sermon, one preached by none other than Yahweh himself, and directly applied to Cain. Gen. 4: 6-7: “So Yahweh said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do

well, will you not be accepted [lit: a lifting up]? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.”

What does the Lord’s homily mean? What is the Lord asking Cain to do when he says, “If you do well, will there not be a lifting up?” The Hebrew Word *nasa’* means “to lift up,” and often connotes “forgiveness,” and therefore acceptance with Yahweh (notice the use of God’s personal covenant name in this story). But *nasa’* also links with Cain’s *fallen* countenance. If Cain does what is right, he can *lift up* his head, his feelings will change. His despondency and shame can be transformed to joy and happiness, a lifting up of the head.

But what does the Lord mean by “if you do well,” or maybe “if you do what’s well pleasing”? I don’t believe that the context favors a reference to good works in general. Instead, this is a reminder to Cain to follow faithfully the instruction of Yahweh concerning the offering of gifts. Presumably this instruction is known from the account of Adam’s sin in Gen. 3 and the Lord’s killing of an animal or animals to cover Adam and Eve with the skins. Abel knew what to offer. Cain should have known, too. The “doing” here refers to the ritual “offering.” *If you do the ritual well*, offer what is well pleasing to me, then there will be a lifting up, you will find forgiveness and emotional well-being.

In other words, God provided Adam, Eve, Abel, and Cain with what we call “the means of grace,” and at that time, these were the appointed sacrificial rituals. If Cain had followed by faith what God had instituted as the means of forgiveness and restoration, he would have experienced forgiveness and strength to resist temptation.

Back to Hebrews 11:4: “By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, *God testifying of his gifts*; and through it he being dead still speaks.” The declaration that Abel “being dead still speaks” means,

according to Martin Luther, “that he who when he was actually alive could not teach even his own brother by his faith and example, now that he is dead teaches the whole world—in other words, he is more alive than ever! So great a thing is faith! It is life in God.”

All of this to say that the story of Cain and Abel teaches us, among other things, about God’s promise, through the ritual means of grace, when properly and faithfully performed, to communicate his favor and power to conquer sin. To use the language of the Christian church, it is about the promise of the sacraments when administered correctly to be for the faithful recipient, the means of his or her appropriation of the Lord’s forgiveness and salvation from the guilt and power of sin.

Now, some may think that my interpretation of the details of Gen. 4 is wrong at points. That’s fine, and we might talk about that. But the larger point, that faith is tied to doing God’s appointed rites correctly, is eminently biblical. That doing God’s appointed sacramental rituals by faith is crucial for experiencing what God promises to give by means of these rituals (“a lifting up” and “forgiveness”) is all over the Bible.

Moreover, once the people of God are organized as communities, the importance of doing the rituals correctly becomes acute. God puts men in charge of performing the ordained rituals for the community and they are solemnly charged with doing everything “by the book” in order to insure that the people who by faith participate in the sacrificial rites receive and experience what God intends to communicate to them. When the priests and the worshippers perform the rituals by faith, exercising care to do so according to God’s instructions, then the Lord is pleased (as it says in Leviticus a dozen times or more: he smells the “the pleasing aroma”). The Lord is at peace with his people and the worshippers are comforted and empowered for life.

Consider the stipulated question for this colloquium: **What do the sacraments actually accomplish in their administration?** Well, when they are faithfully performed, God actually gives everything he promises to give to those who participate in the rites by faith. Faith trusts God to give the gifts he promises in the way that he has ordained. So if Christ has ordained baptism “to be a sign and seal of ingrafting into himself, of remission of sins by his blood, and regeneration by his Spirit, of adoption, and resurrection unto everlasting life” (WLC Q. 165), then a faith-filled Christian will believe that God gives him these gifts by means of baptism. He will believe what Christ says about the sacrament. That’s not presumption; it is faith.

Furthermore, Pastors, who have been ordained to administer the rite of Holy Baptism, will take care to perform baptisms (and talk about them) in such a way that the recipients of the sacrament will be left in no doubt about what God gives them. *The way we ministers perform the rite* must not jeopardize the recipient’s trusting what God has said is actually signed, sealed, and applied to her in the administration of the rite. *How* we do baptism matters.

In this presentation, however, I don’t intend to talk much about the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is a simple rite, with only one action – the application of water to the one being baptized in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And baptism happens only once—at the beginning of a disciple’s journey.

There are, to be sure, ways of mucking up a baptism. One can add all kinds of extraneous rituals to the simple act that then end up obscuring the central divine action. I believe one can even *do* a baptism in such a way that the one baptized believes it is really all about some decision she has made or will make rather than about God’s work for her. Moreover, someone can refuse to use the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for ideological reasons. But this then invalidates the sacrament and the rite is no longer Christian baptism.

So even though there are ways of performing the rite of baptism such that Christ's people are confused and even led astray, the rite itself is not a complex, ordered series of ritual acts. It's simple — apply water to someone in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and it's Christian baptism. Keep it simple and believers are not likely to be confused by our ministerial performance of the ritual for them.

The Lord's Supper, however, is another matter. Christ ordained this covenant meal as an ordered series of ritual words and actions that takes up a certain amount of time and even space. And it is to be performed *repeatedly* in the local assembly of Christian worshipers. And unlike Baptism, that can be performed almost anywhere—using a puddle on the side of the road, in a jail house, at the bank of a river (the place and circumstances of baptism are not stipulated in Scripture)—the Lord's Supper happens in and is performed by the Christian community. It is a ritual meal eaten by disciples who regularly “gather together as a church” (1 Cor. 11:18). The Supper is performed *in* the community of disciples and *by* the people of God under the leadership of an ordained pastor.

In addition, there are *multiple ritual acts*: bread and wine are grasped, prayers are made, bread is broken, the food and drink are served, hands reach out to give and to receive, the communicants adopt a particular bodily posture (reclining at Table or sitting), and specific words are spoken in conjunction with these ritual acts. There is, then, praying, grasping, breaking, reclining, giving, receiving, eating, drinking, and all of this should be done in a specific order, if we follow our Lord's careful instructions—prayers of thanksgiving before we eat and drink, bread first, then wine, and so on.

Moreover, because the Supper is an ordered, sequential series of ritual acts performed both by the minister and by the congregation, extreme care must be exercised by those who

preside over this ritual meal to insure that *the manner* in which the Supper is served and consumed by the congregation supports the *meaning* of the meal. For example, in addition to the elemental words and actions of the minister, we must also be concerned with *the way people relate to one another* during the meal at the Table. This is the whole problem with the Corinthian debacle. They eat and drink in a *manner* unworthy of the meaning of the meal. Paul even says that when they “come together, it is *not* the Lord’s Supper” that they eat (1 Cor. 11:20). Why not? Because they are not doing the ritual correctly; they are not eating as a community but as factions and individuals.

So because the Lord’s Supper is a *meal*, we cannot ignore the importance of proper “table manners.” And not only table manners, but also the atmosphere of the dinner and the demeanor of those who sit at this special Table are also significant. Because we ministers have a heightened concern that this Sacrament actually accomplishes everything the Lord intends we will surely want to be extraordinarily careful about the administration or performance or experience of this sacrament in our assembly. Using the words of our colloquium’s question, we want to make sure that this sacrament actually accomplishes what God intends and that *our administration of the meal* is not at cross-purposes with *what God intends to give* by means of the meal.

Now, perhaps a qualification is in order before I proceed. I think we can all agree that there can indeed be a *valid* Communion meal, where Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are truly received by the congregation, even when some of these ritual acts are done in the wrong order or even when words or acts are left out, either through ignorance or by accident. I want to make this clear before I move on. True, I am about to suggest that the manner in which we do the Supper often makes it difficult for the congregation to receive everything the Master of this

Table intends for his guests. But I don't want to create the impression that I believe it is impossible for faithful believers to be nourished and served by the Lord even when everything is not done just right. It's not impossible, but it is difficult.

At our family tables our children can receive nutrients from the food they are served no matter how the meal is ritually ordered. One can have a family meal where no one talks to anyone, no one shares, no one waits for anyone else, and where the parents exercise no discipline at the table and the kids act like wild monkeys. In such situations those at the table can indeed get their minimum daily requirements of food and drink, but, as you know, family meals are about more than ingesting the correct life-sustaining chemicals and minerals. If a particular family meal is badly administered, poorly performed, if the atmosphere is wrong, and manners are ignored, then what is "actually accomplished" in the administration of this meal will be minimal at best—biological nutrients are delivered—but *sociologically* what the meal is intended to accomplish will likely be lost or even contradicted.

At the family table members of the household engage in rituals that ground and orient them in love and service to siblings, parents, and guests. They sit down together. They wait for one another. They serve one another. They speak with one another. And all of this is highly ritualized, but not for that reason inauthentic or useless. At the table we embody in concrete ways our respect for and love for one another. At the table we not only embody, but we also learn through the table rituals how to live as a family.

When a family eats together each member learns to deny him or herself, to give and receive, to share and to accept gifts from others, not only our food but also our thoughts and feelings. By means of these daily ritual meals children learn they are loved and accepted, full members of the family. These common meals will be times of renewed relationships as

everyone eats and drinks together. A child that was disciplined earlier in the day, now knows, and more importantly, experiences and feels, by these simple ritual acts at the Table, that he is loved and accepted by his parents and siblings. At least that's the way it ought to be.

Let me put it like this: these household meals are "quasi-sacramental." They are family covenant meals and those at the table come to know and experience through ritual "signs and seals" the love and care of their parents and siblings. But a family meal poorly performed, badly administered by the parents will only communicate biological nutrients, and in fact, it may actually have negative sociological effects on the members of the family.

Now back to the key question: What does the Lord's Supper actually accomplish in its administration? Sometimes much less than what God intends because of the way we administer and the way our people experience the ritual meal as a congregation.

Our inattention to the ritual, or our thoughtless reception and repetition of poorly crafted modes of performance (regardless of their pedigree or claim to tradition), 1) often makes it very difficult for people to believe what we have taught them to believe that God gives them at the Table, and 2) may actually hinder a faithful reception of the fullness of grace God intends to communicate by means of the covenant meal.

Questions arise. The big one being: What are you actually talking about, Meyers? In what way have we poorly performed the rite of the Lord's Supper? Are you talking about some technical glitch in the ritual that would ruin everything? How does our administration of the Supper hinder the actual accomplishment of what Christ intends?

Fair questions. To begin with, I'm not talking about some minuscule hiccup in our ritual performance of the Supper, but something more global. I will briefly address three broad areas

of concern, given our limited time, with the hope that I will provoke you to think about these matters further. Here are my three concerns: First, the overall ritual atmosphere at the Table. Second, the introspective, individualistic way in which we ritually eat this meal. Third, and related to this, the way we fence the Table and how that affects the experience of the Lord's people at Table. All of these concerns have to do with how we ministers and elders oversee the ritual performance of the Supper and therefore how it is experienced by the community at the Table.

Let's start with the overall atmosphere at the Table. Perhaps I can begin to make you feel the force of this problem with what I believe is one of the reasons why weekly communion is often resisted in some of our churches. I know there is a common argument that we don't want to do the Lord's Supper too often because it will become too common and end up being a meaningless, repeated ritual. To this objection defenders of weekly communion remind those leery of such ritual repetition that there are many such rituals that we repeat daily or weekly in our everyday lives and would never think of doing monthly or quarterly just because they might get old—kissing and holding hands with our spouses, simple ritual greetings and gestures, the way we go to bed at night, the way we get up in the morning, and so on. No one says, "I'm not going to shake hands with anyone for a month so as to avoid meaningless repetition. Repetition is one thing, meaningless repetition is something else entirely.

But what if the reason that many Christian people don't want the Lord's Supper every week were because it's not a very pleasant experience? For more than a decade, ever since I've been involved with liturgical reformation in our circles, the number of churches, established and planted, that have moved to weekly communion, has encouraged me. But there are many Christians that cannot abide the suggestion. And I have heard that some churches that moved to

a weekly Supper, after a few months or so, have returned to monthly, even quarterly communion. Could it be that in many cases the reason people resist weekly communion is that having a somber, funereal ritual disguised as a meal every week is not very pleasant.

Remember, the Supper is a feast, a joyful banquet where we dine with our risen Lord Jesus and with one another. In a normal Christian liturgy, the congregation will have confessed their sins and received forgiveness early in the service. After which they have heard the Lord's gracious instruction in the reading of Scripture and through the preaching of the pastor. At the end of the service and before the church is sent out the Lord invites his people to sit down, relax, and enjoy his presence and each other's friendship and love ritually embodied in a covenant meal. Tasty bread and good wine given by the Lord to his people and shared with one another. It ought to be a happy, encouraging experience.

Is there anything in the Bible, either Old or New Testaments, to suggest that covenant memorial meals are not to be experienced with joy and exuberance? There is, of course, a time to fast and mourn, a time for deep repentance and tears. But normally that is not what happens at *meals*. It might happen *before* the meal, but this kind of dour demeanor and posture at the Lord's Supper is oppressive and counterproductive. Don't we also call this sacrament a "Eucharistic meal"? "Eucharist" means "give thanks," so shouldn't we then expect the mood at the Table to be thankfulness and gratitude? The end of all of human history is the triumphant marriage supper of the Lamb, the eschatological wedding feast of Jesus and his bride; therefore, the end or culmination of our divine services should also be a joyful banquet. The very presence of wine at the Table means that we are celebrating and should be joyful and glad? During communion we don't gather at Jesus' tomb but at his Table.

Related to my first concern about the funereal atmosphere of our administration of the Supper is the second problem with our ritual experience at the Table: the individualistic, introspective way in which we eat and drink at the Supper. The way we conduct the Supper encourages people to think that Communion is not much more than a heightened experience of individual, private devotion. We receive communion as if there were no one else present. The way we do communion might be described as a Protestant form of private mass. Everyone curls up and in on themselves. There may be a lot of other people present, but they don't have much to do with our isolated reception of the bread and wine. Everything outside of the individual's inner disposition—the bread and wine, other people, music during the distribution, the quiet atmosphere—these are often treated as not much more than props to aid individual believers in their longing for an intense personal experience during Communion. Now, I am not opposed to intense personal experiences during the Lord's Supper. But what we should oppose is the elevation of individualistic, isolated devotional experiences as the epitome of the covenant meal. One pastor who introduced ritual greetings from one communicant to another as the bread and wine were being passed—for example, “The peace of Christ be with you”—was confronted by someone a few weeks later. The parishioner complained, “Communion has always been a very special time for me, my personal private time with the Lord. But now with this new way of doing things I am distracted by the people around me and all the noise in the sanctuary.”

Eating and drinking alone is sometimes necessary. But it is *not* normal. You may have to eat fast food in your car by yourself occasionally. But when there are other people are with you in the car or at a common table eating with you, ignoring them is rude and anti-social. It's just plain weird. What would we think about a meal at home with everyone seated around the family table but no one speaks to anyone else? No one looks at anyone else. Everyone acts as if

no one else is really present. What if everyone curled up to consume his or her own private meal in silence? We would think something is wrong. And we would be right. Now, by way of analogy, could it be that something is wrong with the way we perform the Lord's Supper in our churches?

This is not simply common sense or an argument drawn from our experience at common tables and then applied to the Lord's Table. We know from the Scriptures that what God wants to actually accomplish in the administration of this sacrament is social and relational, not merely something within isolated souls. Paul warned the Corinthian church that they were doing the Lord's Supper in a way that visibly and tangibly violated one of its defining purposes. The Table ought to constitute the people of God as *one*. What happens at the Supper is inescapably social. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10: one loaf = one body. A Christian "proves himself" (1 Cor. 11:28) when he behaves as a loving member of the body of Christ, avoiding divisive and schismatic behavior, especially in his behavior at the communion [*koinonia*] table. And this is precisely where the Corinthian Christians failed; they refused to wait for one another at the Lord's Supper, even going so far as to eat their own private family or cliquish meals (1 Cor. 11:20-22, 33-34). This *way of eating* the Lord's Supper had the effect of dividing the body, and since the rich were using the Table as an occasion for a feast with their wealthy buddies, the weaker, poorer members of the body were being treated as second-class Christians at the meal. Paul berates them for their perverted ritual performance of the Supper: "Do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? (1 Cor. 11:22)

When Paul reaches his conclusion he does *not* summarize his warnings at the end of 1 Cor. 11 by reminding them to engage in rigorous, introspective self-examination before coming to the Table. He does *not* warn them against participating in the Supper if they don't understand

the metaphysics of the “real presence” of the glorified human body of Christ. (Is it in heaven or in the bread and wine?) He does *not* warn them about eating and drinking without having sufficient devotional preparation: “I see some of you looking around when you ought to have your eyes closed and head bowed in meditation on the death of Jesus!” What he *does* tell them is to “wait for each other” (v. 33). Act like a community. Eat together. Eat as a unified family. Once again, this entire passage is about the *manner* in which the church at Corinth eats the Lord's Supper. They are not doing the ritual correctly.

In Galatia, Peter withdrew from the Table when the wrong sorts of people were present (Gentiles). The entire letter of Galatians is occasioned by this blatant act of anti-social behavior on the part of Peter and others at the Table (Gal. 2:11-14). Table fellowship = inclusion in God's family. If you are at the Table, then you are a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. At the Lord's Table there ought to be neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for everyone gathered to the Supper are all one in Christ, all are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise (Gal 3). The communion meal is Good News and the administration and experience of it is meant to break down sinful, even natural barriers that divide people. According to Galatians, doing the Lord's Supper wrong may actually lead to wrong notions about justification. What God intends to communicate and effect through the Supper is thwarted because the ritual is not being performed correctly.

So how should we administer the sacrament so that what actually happens is what the Lord intends to happen among his people? Let me suggest a few possibilities. Start with training people to stop curling up and bending inward during the Supper. Let them know it is okay to keep their head up and look around at others. It's more than okay; it is the best way to eat *together*. It is normal. Give them something to sing together, or better, to say to one another

during the distribution. As they pass the bread to the person next to them, they could say, “The Body of Christ given for you.” The one receiving might say, “Amen,” or even “Thank you.” As they pass the wine, “The peace of Christ be with you.” The recipient could say, “And also with you.” After they pass the bread and/or the wine they can greet the person behind them or in front of them. They might even—gasp!—chat with them for a moment about how they are doing. This would mean that the sanctuary would be filled with the noise of many joyful conversations around the room, surely even some laughter. The Supper would then be a ritual that the people of God actually experienced as the communal meal it is meant to be.

My third concern—the way we fence the Table—demands much more historical, theological, and biblical analysis than I can possibly even allude to here at the end of my talk. I’d love for this topic to be a research project for a number of theological students and pastors. My concern is with the solemn way we fence the Table at every occasion of the Lord’s Supper. A proper “fencing” is appropriate—that is, insuring as best we can that only baptized, professing believers are at the family table. In the early post-apostolic church this was done by physically keeping unbaptized people out of the assembly when the church celebrated the Eucharist.

Certainly, we need to guard the Table so that everyone who eats together has the confidence that they are in communion not only with their risen Lord, but also with the other members of his body that are present at the Supper. But why do we need to add to this “fencing” a somber, even threatening reading of Paul’s warnings to the Corinthian church in chapter 11 of his epistle along with intense calls to repentance and warnings directed at God’s people? Have you truly repented? Do you really believe? Have you been genuinely converted? Have you thoroughly confessed all your sins? Are there any known sins that remain unconfessed? Have you honestly examined your heart and concluded that you are worthy to come to the Table?

We need to consider the possibility that this kind of “super fencing” of the Table is one of the chief reasons why what God intends to give to his people through the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is actually not received by many. Why do I say this? A number of years ago I noticed that one of the members of my congregation was leaving “for the bathroom” regularly during communion. I had been praying for and counseling this person for many months so I was sensitive to her behavior in church. When we met again I asked her about this. She said, “Pastor, you know what I am struggling with. You know how unworthy I have felt. How can I come to the Table with the problems I have? Certainly, if anyone is not worthy to partake, it is I.” Well, this woman had been struggling with sin and therefore with assurance for a long time. And I found out that she had been either leaving the sanctuary or letting the bread and wine pass for a long time as well. And I should add this: her sins were not high-handed. She was a normal, everyday sinner. But because she believed she was not truly, honestly, thoroughly, and genuinely repentant and therefore unworthy of the Supper, the very sacrament that was intended to communicate the love and acceptance of God, the ongoing care and forgiveness of Christ the Lord, and the joy of salvation became for her the opposite. In effect, she excommunicated herself.

Not doing the ritual correctly can actually throw people back on their own inner resources instead of directing them to look outside of themselves, receiving bread and wine from the Lord, and thereby trusting the Lord’s appointed tangible and edible means of assurance. We *confess* that the grace we need as sinners comes from outside of us (*extra nos*). But when people come to the Table, the way we *do* the sacrament effectively teaches them to look inward for assurance. Our repeated and excessive emphasis on “fencing the Table” has the effect of making it difficult for Christian people to find assurance *at the Lord’s Table*. Our “super fencing” tradition ends

up asking people to be assured of their salvation *before* they come to the Table. Our “super warnings” obscure the communal dimension of the sacrament, and in effect insure that each person is isolated and alone in his or her quest for assurance. Here, then, is a particularly serious example of the sacrament actually accomplishing something different or even at odds with what God intends because of our poor performance of the rite.

Conclusion

Maybe you’re thinking that all this talk about the ritual performance of the Supper is about relatively unimportant, outward, external circumstances. That fussing about rituals is a distraction from the true “spiritual” nature of the sacrament. If this is what you are thinking, I must admit that you have a good portion of our tradition as an inspiration for such an attitude. Our theological heritage tends to belittle and marginalize questions about rituals and performance. We have been much more concerned with the metaphysics of the sacrament.

We theorize in the abstract about the location of the glorified, ascended body of Christ in relation to the bread and wine, and then also about the delivery mechanism by which the isolated Christian soul receives whatever we say he or she receives in the Supper. Jesus said, “Do this,” but we act as if he really meant, “Understand this,” or “Define this, and make sure you precisely classify the metaphysics of the relation of the individual soul, the material elements, and the risen Lord.”

We all sometimes act as if it is crucial for worthy participation in the Supper that our people be able to define terms and identify the various metaphysical errors of other ecclesiastical communions, and that such knowledge will serve them better than our care that the ritual performance of the Supper is done well. I freely confess that as a pastor I’m

concerned not so much (not much at all really) with whether everyone in my congregation is able to recite a metaphysically correct definition of sacramental efficacy. Rather, I want to make sure that they will experience the fullness of God's grace *as they do the Eucharistic rite together*. Whatever theological notions about the metaphysics of the Supper are floating around in people's minds as they sit at the Lord's Table, their hearts and consciences will be moved more by the way the Supper is done and therefore experienced in the community.

Since the Lord's Supper is a meal, and meals are always ordered rites and not merely opportunities for the injection of nutrients, the church must give careful thought to the how she performs these actions, this rite of the Lord's Supper. Abel though dead, still speaks. Faith believes God's promises and faithfully uses his appointed means of grace. And the Lord's sermon to Cain still applies to us: if by faith we do the ritual correctly, we will receive by God's gracious promise, forgiveness and a lifting up of the head. If we as pastors oversee the performance of the rite as God desires, it will accomplish what he intends among his people and in the world. If we don't, and we do the Supper haphazardly or simply according to a traditional maudlin, introspective, individualistic American piety, the administration of the Sacrament may actually be counterproductive in the life of individual Christians and the church as a whole.