

JOHN MCTAVISH AND MAC WATTS DISCUSS SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY

Mac Watts:

Some time ago John McTavish suggested to me that he and I might engage in a public dialogue about sacramental theology, which could be published in *Touchstone*. At first I didn't pick up on the idea, but when he proposed it again I decided to go for it. We followed the rule that we made no changes in what we had written after we had read the other's response. So here's the result.

John McTavish:

I once asked our local Catholic priest if he hoped the ban on priestly marriage would some day be lifted. He said he did hope so. In fact, he would be delighted to see the ban lifted. He only regretted that it wouldn't happen in his lifetime. So I asked if he had ever thought of leaving his church and becoming an Anglican priest. No, he said, he could never do that.

“Why not?”

“The Eucharist.”

“But the Anglicans celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday.”

“It wouldn't be the same.”

“What do you mean it wouldn't be the same?”

“The real presence would be missing.”

This kind of thinking, I confess, drives me nuts. But then it also exasperates me that we Protestants are equally plugged into the magic world of sacramentalism. Only we're just a little more subtle. We talk about the matter spiritually while the Catholics talk about it realistically. Both of us, however, are brainlessly conjuring up Christ at the communion table and the baptismal font.

I don't see any biblical warrant for this at all. “Whenever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” That's the biblical perspective. There am I! Not,

there I will be if only the gospel is faithfully proclaimed and the sacraments duly administered. No, there I already am. I, Jesus, am already waiting for the people to turn up at church. The clergy aren't needed to conjure me up. Wherever two or three are gathered together, there I already am.

The Jews may have gotten it wrong in rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. But they never got drawn into the Mystery religion way of thinking that has turned the church's understanding of Baptism and the Lord's Supper into such a farce. This is where we Christians, it seems, have gotten it wrong. And now, just as it is almost impossible for the Jews to change their tune after whistling it for so long, so, it seems, it's next to impossible for us to change our tune about the sacraments.

Nevertheless, some pretty good 20th century theologians have offered to lead us out of the wilderness, if only we will follow. Karl Barth, for one ("Baptism as the Foundation of the Christian Life", *Church Dogmatics*, Volume IV, 4) and Arthur Cochrane for another (*Eating and Drinking with Jesus: An Ethical and Biblical Inquiry*).

Here is a quote from Karl Barth on the matter — Barth, not John Spong or Marcus Borg, let alone Tom Harpur. No, Barth, who always refused to play fast and loose with the tradition at the expense of the Word, but equally refused to shield the tradition from the liberating judgment of the Word:

There are these remarkable relics... of the idea that by our own actions, whether in proclamation or in the sacraments — we could, as it were, set the divine allocution in motion. That is something we are totally unable to do. All we can do is witness how God speaks. Witness, however, is response. The whole life of the Church from top to bottom is nothing but response to the Word of God. The Church lives under the promise and the hope that in this response, this echo to God's Word (whether in the form of preaching, the sacraments, or religious instruction) God's Word itself will become audible.... It is a matter, not of emptying baptism and communion of their content, but of filling them with their right

content, and doing so by looking at the actions of the congregation and of individual Christians.” (*Fragments Grave and Gay*, edited by Martin Rumscheidt, pp. 90-91)

Mac Watts:

I think you are quite right, John: through the Holy Spirit Jesus Christ gets there first. He is already there when we gather in his name. But the church has a long tradition of offering prayers of invocation. We ask for the presence of Christ. We ask for a presence that already exists. Other polarities like that are found throughout the New Testament, where the truth is found only in the polarity. And we need to remember that in the biblical tradition, it's not enough to say God is everywhere. God is also somewhere. The Hebrew word *Shekinah* referred to the unique presence of God in the Ark, and thus in the Temple. In addition, God presents Himself in specific times and places; e.g. in the burning bush, and in the encounter of people with angels..

But to move more directly toward the issue we are to debate. If I take you at your word, that you seek biblical warrant for a sacramental theology, we need to examine passages in addition to the one where Jesus speaks about two or three being gathered together in his name. A good place to begin is, I think, the earliest account of the Upper Room event which is found in the 11th chapter of I Corinthians. There we hear of Jesus relating the bread and wine of the Passover meal to his body and blood. We are not told that the disciples gasped in outrage or wonder, but it could well have been a mixture of both. For in Jewish culture, no one spoke of blood casually, since it made one unclean. And to suggest that they might be drinking it was an appalling idea, since the eating of blood was utterly forbidden. For a Jew like Paul to recount these words without drama means that he had crossed an absolutely huge divide. He was thinking differently about everything.

And thus also, without exclamation marks, the three synoptics writers record the same event, the wording not all the same, but the gist very much the same. They have all come to

recognize that Christians are to take bread and wine that is connected with the body and blood of Christ.

The recounting of the Upper Room, or *a* Upper Room, is different in John's Gospel. There Jesus washes his disciples feet. But the meal is not forgotten. In chapter 6 we hear the account of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, and then later about Jesus rather rudely telling his fans that they shouldn't work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures. And he claims that he is the bread of life. In liberal churches like ours, we read that story with satisfaction, but that's because we stop reading before it gets complicated. By the time the narrative gets to verse 51, it suddenly becomes offensive. Not surprisingly, it was offensive to the people Jesus was talking to, since eating human flesh and drinking human blood was unthinkable. And it is unthinkable to us. We cling to the words that come a little later where Jesus says, "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." Now that's more like it!

Yes, for us that's more like it. But why are those other words there? For some it's no problem, since they take the stand that we can't always rely on what the Fourth Gospel writer puts in the mouth of Jesus. But suppose you take that stand, John. I believe you still have to come to terms with that difficult passage. Since I know you don't think the writer of the Fourth Gospel was a screwball, how could he put words in Jesus' mouth that were disgusting to Gentiles, and besides being disgusting also to Jews were in addition theologically scandalous? His stated purpose is to bring people to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Of all the things in his Gospel that might be offensive to virtually every outsider, this is by far the worst.

There is a scholarly consensus that the existence of the four accounts of the Upper Room reflect an existing liturgical practice in the Christian communities. And I believe this challenging passage in John not only reflects the practice, but is also a comment on it. And there is a consistency about the Fourth Gospel. Early in the story, John the Baptist points to Jesus as

being the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And in the Hebrew tradition the lamb sacrificed for sin was eaten!

In any case, all four Gospels and Paul assume the celebration of the Lord's Supper as a central part of Christian worship, and unlike what is happening in many United Churches presently, in their Eucharists the early Christians used the words about the bread and wine as being connected with the body and blood of Jesus.

So, John, I am of the opinion that, when Christians a little later took one of St. Paul's favourite words, mystery, and applied it to the Lord's Supper, they had good reason. For the connection between the bread and wine and the body and blood of Christ was not an obvious one. It was indeed a mystery.

But I mustn't move on yet to the period after New Testament times. If this is to be a dialogue, I must allow you to respond to what I have already written.

John McTavish:

When theologians like Barth and Cochrane reject sacramentalism, they are not calling into question "the long tradition of invocation". The fact that Jesus is already present where two or three are gathered together in his name does not preclude his special presence by the Holy Spirit in the power of which faith and hope and love are kindled. Sacramentalism, rather, suggests that Christ is not fully present, or his presence is not fully realized, until the Word is proclaimed and the Sacrament administered. Catholics and Protestants may disagree as to *how* Jesus becomes present, but they both claim that Christ somehow becomes present in and through the Eucharist or Lord's Supper — and is then eaten. This is the kind of thinking that Barth and Cochrane wish to overturn.

But what is the Lord's Supper, one might ask, if it is not a sacrament? Barth suggests that it is basically a meal: "The Lord's Supper was just a meal of fellowship, and wine and bread were simply the common food. We must not give special importance to bread and wine. Emphasis on bread and wine is not New

Testament, but cosmic philosophy.” (*Karl Barth’s Table Talk*, edited by John D. Godsey, p. 22). In *Eating and Drinking with Jesus*, Arthur Cochrane suggests that the meal is an act of faith in which we acknowledge that Jesus Christ has offered up his flesh as a sacrifice for the life of the world, an act of love in which food is shared with the neighbour and especially the poor, and an act of hope in which Jesus is remembered as the one who not only came but comes again at the end of time to make all things new.

We tend to read the New Testament eucharistic texts as though Paul and the apostles had already been well instructed by Augustine and the sacramental tradition. In fact, these passages were written by good Jews celebrating the new Christ-charged Passover in good Jewish fashion. The problem in Corinth was not that the Corinthians were failing to recognize Christ in and through and under the elements. It was simply that they were eating and drinking too much at the Lord’s Supper: “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.”(1 Corinthians 11: 20, 21) Paul advises the Corinthians to have something to eat at home if they are going to make pigs of themselves at the Supper: “So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation.” (33, 34)

Re. John 6: You are right that it doesn’t matter whether the words are the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus or not. It does matter that the passage was written, once again, by a good Jew. “I am the bread of life,” says Jesus. (35) He is not talking about a little Catholic wafer. He is saying, if I may paraphrase, “This is the bread that came down from heaven. This is the manna that nourishes the world. This is the flesh that you intend to crucify. Go ahead. *I intend my flesh to be eaten*. This is the only way I can help you.”

These words, of course, are scandalous. “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (52). But the scandal has nothing to do with the Eucharistic quarrels of the Church in later centuries. It is entirely the scandal of the cross. Jesus is saying in effect that his death will have nothing to do with a Samson-like suicide or a Zealot-like revolt against Rome. No, Jesus’ death will be a death in which the very people he is addressing put him to death — and yet only by so doing will they live!

No wonder Jesus’ hearers are confused and scandalized. But, again, the scandal has nothing to do with the centuries-later quarrel over the Church’s understanding of the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine of communion. This was a Jew speaking to fellow Jews in language that the Jews had long since made their own. Eating someone’s flesh was a common biblical metaphor for hostile action: “When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell” (Psalm 27: 2, KJV). “Have they no knowledge, all the evil doers who eat up my people as they eat bread...” (Psalm 14: 4 and Ps. 53: 4). “Many bulls encircle me... they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion... Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog! Save me from the mouth of the lion!” (Psalm 22: 12,13 and 20, 21).

The scandal that Jesus speaks of in John 6 — “He who eats me will live because of me ”(57) — is the scandal of the cross. Paul, as usual, had already driven the point home: “We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1: 23, 24).

Mac Watts:

Carrying on a dialogue of this sort has many limitations to it, one of the chief being that the comments of each partner must be relatively brief. We thus end up responding only to a few of the remarks of the other, and it may seem thereby that we think

the rest of what they say is unimportant. That's not the case, but we'll have to put up with the restraints brevity imposes upon us.

John, you claim that in chapter 6 of the Fourth Gospel the writer was "a Jew speaking to fellow Jews in language that the Jews had long since made their own. Eating someone's flesh was a common biblical metaphor for hostile action..." I think the second part of that statement is perfectly true, as your examples indicate. But the writer of the Fourth Gospel saw the eating and drinking of Jesus' body and blood as a blessing, and I know of no evidence that Jews had made such language their own. On the contrary.

I find it revealing that you state that the remarks in John 6 have "nothing to do with the Eucharistic quarrels of the Church in later centuries", and then again that they have "nothing to do with the centuries-later quarrel over the Church's understanding of the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine of communion". The evidence from the scholarly study of the early church is that that text, and the four accounts of the Upper Room had everything to do with those "quarrels". They may have gotten them all wrong, as you believe, but they studied them with great intensity.

Indeed, to speak only of quarrels is to give a false impression. They worshipped. Every Sunday they gathered to celebrate the Eucharist. And it wasn't Augustine, or some other later theologian, who turned their heads around and got them, perversely, to believe in "real presence". Consider Justin Martyr. He was born of pagan parents around 100 in what is now Syria, was educated there and became a Christian there. He made a trip to Rome, and around 140 or 150 wrote a defence of Christianity to the Emperor Antonius Pius, which includes the earliest description we have available of the Christian services. He describes briefly what they do about baptizing people, and then continues:

After thus washing [i.e baptizing] those who have been convinced and signified their assent, [we] lead them to those

who are called brothers and sisters, where they are assembled...Then bread and water and mixed wine are brought to the president... and he, taking them, sends up praise and glory to the Father of the universe through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... When he has finished the prayers...the whole congregation present assents, saying, "Amen"... [T]hose whom we call deacons give to each of those present a portion of the eucharistized bread and wine and water, and they [also] take it to the absent.

This food we call Eucharist... For we do not receive these things as common bread or common drink; but as Jesus Christ our Saviour being incarnate by God's word took flesh and blood for our salvation, so also we have been taught that the food eucharistized by the word of prayer... is the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus.

I consider it worth noting that in the middle of the 2nd century Justin writes "we have been taught that..." He doesn't say that he teaches, or that he thinks the church should teach. Around the year 150 a significant Christian writes, "we have been taught". Disagree with him theologically if you must, John, but it is not good history to suggest that such teaching only came in "later centuries". And if we take into account that this was written to the Emperor in order to make him more friendly toward the Christian movement, it seems to me beyond the realm of possibility that Justin would invent ideas about the character of its worship that would reinforce the accusation that the Christians practised cannibalism.

Since I believe, as you do, that Barth is the greatest theologian of our times, it is difficult for me to differ with him on such a crucial issue. And it was difficult for that disciple of Barth, T.F. Torrance, without whose drive Barth's *Church Dogmatics* wouldn't have been made available to English readers. But I stand with Torrance. And I stand with the most insightful of Barth's Catholic pupils and admirers, Hans Urs von Balthasar. And I stand with the greatest English-speaking scholar

of our age in the field of Christian theological history, the late Jaroslav Pelikan, who always sought an irenic word:

As a result of all the variety among the churches, the Eucharist has been a central issue in the discussions and deliberations of the ecumenical movement, whose discussions have led many to the conclusion that the various doctrines of the eucharistic presence may be complementary rather than antithetical and that each doctrine may need the others to rescue it from overemphasis and distortion.

Such a generous attitude stayed with him to the end. But after almost 60 years of intense scholarly study of the 2000 years of church history, this faithful Lutheran clergyman decided that he belonged somewhere else. While still proud of his Lutheran heritage, he became a lay member of the Eastern Orthodox Church. For there he could be part of a community that takes seriously the role which Mary, Mother of God, plays in the history of salvation. And there he could participate in a gloriously rich liturgy that takes for granted that Jesus Christ is not only the host of the gathering, but also the feast.

John McTavish:

You're right. Justin Martyr had worshippers eating Jesus in the Lord's Supper by the 2nd century. So did Ignatius of Antioch. But the earliest liturgies, as Oscar Cullmann has shown, do not reflect a sacramental understanding. Cochrane points out that in the *Didache* the Eucharist is a "thank offering" and consists of a service of prayer and praise in which the blessings of creation and redemption are commemorated. There is no mention of the so-called words of institution.

Nevertheless, once the thinking of the Mystery religions infiltrated the church's understanding of the Lord's Supper, it has proven next to impossible to get it out. Zwingli tried but was easily overpowered by Luther and Calvin, and few in our day have taken Barth's arguments seriously. I'm just grateful that all this quasi-Gnostic thinking "only" affected the Lord's Supper

(and baptism), and did not make significant inroads in the church's understanding of Incarnation and Atonement.

Thanks, Mac, for discussing this important matter. Tell you what. I'll hold my nose and read Pelikan. You do the same for Cochrane!

Mac Watts:

The "so-called" words of institution? They seem to be distasteful to you, John, as they are to many ministers in our church, who avoid them like the plague. But I can understand it with most of the others, since they are estranged from atonement theology. That's not the case with you, thank God. There is obviously much still to talk about.