

Disciples and the Lord's Supper *

James Duke
Brite Divinity School
Ft. Worth, Texas

I am honored by the invitation to participate in this session of the group. For me it is a pleasure as well for several reasons, some quite personal. During my childhood I took part for a season in each of three streams of the SCM (Stone-Campbell movement) whose representatives gather here. My work in teaching and scholarship has benefited greatly from contributions, and friendships, coming my way from my colleagues in Churches of Christ (COC) and Christian Churches (CCCC). Plus, I've found my several opportunities to participate in work of the CC (DOC)'s Council on Christian Unity the most welcome and welcoming forms of home-church service I've known.

My task, as I understood it, is to share some thoughts on "Disciples and the Lord's Supper," mainly by focusing on the work of the Theological Commission of the Council on Christian Unity. This is a far more modest enterprise than coverage of CC (DOC) developments over the entire 20th century—and the larger task is quite beyond my present reach. My initial effort to plot the SCM trajectory on this topic in hard-nosed historical-theological terms on my church's behalf is now 20-something years old. It lingers still in some library collections. Its results, well-winnowed, have gone into the makings of two more recent summary overviews: one by Mark G. Toulouse, my Brite colleague;¹ another, the SCM encyclopedia article by Paul Blowers and Byron Lambert.² Though none of us see or put things exactly the same, I make it no secret that I regard both works as exceptionally worthwhile reading.

Here my plan is to attempt a very brief review of the Commission's study on the Lord's Supper. It is appropriate, I think, to

*This essay was presented at the 2007 meeting of the Stone-Campbell Dialogue Group at University Christian Church, Austin, Texas.

look to this work, even though others working as individuals or small groups have had important roles to play in Disciples “liturgical theology and practice.” The Commission provides a helpful, quick-study approximation of emphases and concerns among Disciples midway between Restructure and today. This theological work is not, so far as I can tell, a turning point for the CC (DOC). That was not its intention anyway. Still, it is a milestone marker for making rough estimates of Disciples history in midcourse over the last half-century or more. To it I offer a few paragraphs—admittedly rather personalized and hence unscientific postscripts—of retrospective commentary.

The Commission’s mission was to invite, stimulate, and facilitate theological reflection and discussion among ordained ministers and laity throughout the church. Ecclesiology, the nature and purpose of the church, was chosen for extensive—and as things worked out, extended (roughly two decades, 1977-1997)—study. Research and discussion of this theme related in the main to continuities, changes, and challenges of faith and faithfulness for Disciples. The Commission addressed the Lord’s Supper along with other ecclesiological topics such as “Witness, Mission, and Unity,” Authority, Ministry, and Baptism. Also studied were two matters of distinct, rather pressing, church-wide concern, Jewish-Christian relations and soteriology. Each of the completed, formal, reports highlighted biblical Witness, the Disciples heritage, prominent concerns in church history and ecumenics, as well as Disciples church practices.

These reports, which Commission members thought of as plainspoken “words to the church” and “aids for reflection,” were submitted to the Council on Christian Unity for consideration and thereafter inclusion in its official reports to the General Assembly. The Council sought also to arrange for workshops or dialogue sessions at each General Assembly, as well as publication of a booklet-sized study guide on each topic.

The Word to the Church on the Lord’s Supper takes as its signature theme the phrases in the Preamble of the CC (DOC) Design: “As members of the Christian Church, we confess that . . . at the table of the Lord we celebrate with thanksgiving the saving acts and presence of Christ.” The special status and role the Lord’s Supper holds in the life of the church and its members are noted.

A twofold request follows. Disciples are asked to consider, first, how our high devotion to the Lord’s Table, including insistence on its essentiality in weekly corporate worship, sets us in relationship

with Christians in the other churches participating in the church universal, even though diverse historic teachings and practices distinguish—and sadly at times divide—the body of Christ. In addition, Disciples are asked to consider in and for ourselves a profound question of faith and practice: “are our worship practices, our teachings, and our theological reflections adequate testimonies to the significance of the Lord’s Supper?”³

Reflections on the Disciples heritage follow. Efforts focus on recovering a sense of the historical-theological significance of emphasis on the Lord’s Supper in the era of Stone-Campbell movement origins. The cardinal point made here is recognition that observance of the Lord’s Supper was an integral feature of this movement’s call to unite all Christians by urging fidelity to apostolic faith and order. Included as well in this section are clarifications of several historic terms—foremost among them ordinance, commemorative or monumental institution, and sacrament as ‘visible sign of invisible grace’—which have been important, often controversial, in church history, Stone-Campbell movement history included.

Finally, mention is made that by their heritage and still-prevailing ways today Disciples represent elements and emphases that, *en ensemble*, cut across the most familiar, neat and tidy, ecclesiological categories. Weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper in Sunday corporate worship is typically viewed as a feature of catholic, orthodox, high-church traditions. Absence of a standard or common liturgical (or biblical) pattern of observance is a patently free church feature. In most other respects the language and practices of Disciples regarding the Lord’s Supper range within field-boundaries where Protestants, those of broadly Reformed church descent especially, generally roam.

The report’s central, substantive, affirmations appear in the section on biblically based theological meaning(s) of the Lord’s Supper. Five themes are highlighted.

They are, stating them here in shorthand terms:

- (1) Remembrance, commemoration, memorial;
- (2) communion—*koinonia* with Christ and through him one with another;
- (3) sacrifice—the meal of Christ’s once-and-for-all sacrifice for forgiveness of sin, and our participation in his work by our living,

self-giving responses of praise (thanksgiving, *eucharistia*) and faithful discipleship;

(4) unity—a sign of oneness in Christ as already a reality of God’s own making, not ours, and at the same time an imperative of grace for which Christ’s followers pray and press without ceasing; and

(5) feast of the reign of God—a festal anticipation and foretaste of the messianic banquet of biblical eschatology, when God’s purposes for creation come to ultimate, perfect, fulfillment.

While no short list or survey, it is noted, can exhaust the Supper’s full meaning, these five themes deserve attention in Disciples thought and practice. Taken together, they gather up and attest to the biblical testimony of the convergence of past, present, and future dimensions in the Lord’s Supper. The communal sharing of this bread and cup becomes, by God’s grace, “communion with Jesus Christ, who is also present, with the faithful, as host and as redemptive power.”⁴

The Commission’s Report of 1997 was by design an integrative statement on ecclesiology, summative of key points developed from early topic-specific studies. A close reading may descry on occasion the Commission’s attempts to improve on what had been said before, given further input and second thoughts. Two brief paragraphs, I think, are germane.

The first relates to the term “sacrament.” The Commission states:

Understanding “sacrament” to mean a living and effective “sign,” we regard the celebration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as practices by which the life of the church is conformed to the gracious life of God and the faithful are both called and drawn out of their bondage to themselves. In these practices the church recalls and encounters here and now the wondrous grace of God in Jesus Christ.⁵

The second is:

In the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, the church remembers God’s act of reconciliation in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and through the Spirit it receives the living grace of the

crucified Christ. In this sacrament that makes present for the church the gift of God's transforming grace offered to all human beings, the church finds the center of its worship. The sacrament neither repeats the self-giving of Christ nor adds to it. It celebrates what Jesus Christ has already done, his continuing life in the Spirit for the church, and the coming of the reign of God. In the common realities of the bread and the fruit of the vine, the church knows itself sustained by the body and blood of Jesus Christ."⁶

Issues of Practice

Issues of practice are of course nothing new to Disciples, or other churches for that matter, though many encourage or strive for uniformity and some go out of their way to insist on it. The Theology Commission reaffirmed the Disciples heritage of liturgically free church worship. It affirmed another point as well: the opportunity and challenge of such freedom was to find actions and words that together convey the Supper's theological significance as fully and effectively as possible.

Eight such issues—a short list, so to speak—are selected for brief discussion. They are, by mere heading:

- (1) word and sacrament;
- (2) placement of the Supper in corporate worship;
- (3) invitation to communion;
- (4) confession of sin and absolution;
- (5) presidency at the Table,
- (6) communion prayers
- (7) words of institution, and
- (8) material elements and actions.

Word and Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

The thrust of the Theology Commission's statement is that the Gospel concerning Jesus Christ is the central focus of the church's worship as devotion to the Word as well as observance of the Lord's Supper.

Placement of the Lord's Supper in worship.

The Commission reminds Disciples of varied church-historical emphases on preaching and the Supper, and argues in support of placing the Lord's Supper as the culminating, most fitting climax of Sunday corporate worship.

Invitation to communion.

Affirmed here is the conviction that the Table is not ours but that of Jesus Christ, who is the host offering the invitation to participate. Worship leaders serve here only to make known Christ's call. Disciples, it is said, "invite anyone of sincere faith who wills to come to the Table for we believe that we no less than others are offered there mercy, forgiveness, and new life."⁷

Confession of Sin and Absolution.

The Commission urged that worship make some provision for confession of our sins and words of assurance of forgiveness. It is apt to do so either by corporate statements or in prayers before communion or at the time of the preparation and invitation of the people to the Table.

Question of Presidency.

The thrust of the Commission's view is twofold. It reaffirms the long-standing tradition of participation in leadership at the Table by congregational elders, whether appointed, elected, or ordained to their service. It affirms as well that by acknowledging the priesthood of all believers and understanding ordained (and licensed) ministries as representative ministry, presidency of the church's ordained ministers at the Lord's Supper is altogether appropriate. Permitting anyone

except the church's ordained to preside at the Table is massive category-confusion.

Prayers at the Table.

The Commission encourages those who offer prayers at the Table to uplift its multiple biblical-theological meanings. Acknowledgements of—and the explicit petition for—the power of the Holy Spirit in celebrating this supper and enjoying its benefits are urged as well.

Words of Institution.

The Commission commends “unfailing use of the biblical words of institution in the Lord's Supper.”⁸

Elements and actions of the Lord's Supper.

The Commission asks Disciples to give thought to how the “living symbols” we make by our actions at the Table and the forms of the elements we present contribute to our worship. The breaking of (one) loaf and the pouring out and sharing of (one) cup held for Alexander Campbell—to cite but a single name—heightened biblical and spiritual-experiential meanings. Whether observances of the Lord's Supper today serve to capture and convey such a heightening of this event in Disciples worship is a question calling for on-going consideration.

Unscientific Historical-theological Postscript Paragraphs

1. So far as I can tell, the Theology Commission felt no cause to break any new ground with regard to the theological significance of the Lord's Supper. It attempted none. Emphasis falls, then, not on “catching up with what Disciples have missed” but claiming, owning, and valuing the breadth and depth of our heritage that searches the scriptures and welcomes lessons to be learned from open (but not uncritical) engagement with others committed to Christ and his church.

2. Precedents for seeking out the multiple, full meanings of apostolicity and its ‘essential’ or constitutive elements appear during

the SCM's founding generation. Efforts to identify the full range of meaning(s) with regard to the Lord's Supper increase among the Disciples from the turn of the 20th century on. The various "short lists" that result—with titles or itemized points like 3 or 5, or 7 ½ meanings of the Lord's Supper—rarely if ever actually betoken notable theological disagreements. They are due mainly to differing ways of combining or sorting out a common biblical stock of themes and casting it into contemporary idiom.

3. The term sacrament has become commonplace (but not 100% acclaimed) in Disciples accounts of the Lord's Supper. I cannot certify if this is because generations of scholars, pastors, and studious laity have informed the church about the term or because it's just ordinary American language. I have claimed, and still believe, that the Panel of Scholars legitimized its use among the Disciples, and for good cause—even though the Panel's overall tilt was far from decidedly "sacramentalist."

Much confusion still surrounds the term (and not among Disciples alone). The most theologically significant point the Theology Commission sought to clarify was that the "invisible grace" signified in observing the Lord's Supper is God's grace in Jesus Christ, not the inward faith and self-alleged goodness of the people who gather at the Table. Who and what are "we" memorializing and celebrating at the Table?

4. The Commission takes no stand on "theories" of Christ's presence in church celebration of the Lord's Supper. It affirms this presence explicitly and confidently, but without delineating a second-order theological account of its mode or localization. This stance is, unless I misjudge the situation, where Disciples are in our intra-church and our ecumenical discussions.

There is on the one hand decided resistance to interpreting the Supper as a remembrance or memorial in the sense "empty signs" or something that we humans (believers) do and in so doing signify the "absence of Christ" from us. [Plus, ecumenical engagements and interchanges for over a century has led (most) Disciples to recognize that referring to the historic Eucharistic doctrines of other church communions as theories, speculations, unbiblical or/and "not apostolic" is ill-informed and insensitive at best and at worse, far worse.] On the other hand, Disciples refuse to adopt—or accept—as norms and tests of

fellowship any of the Eucharistic theologies that some church or another presents as its way and the one and only one way of the church universal.

5. The most significant theological advance for Disciples since the Theology Commission's report is, in my view, the chapter of reflections on the Lord's Supper in *Setting the Table*, an anthology of essays on theological topoi by fourteen Disciples women leaders in theology and the church. Highlighted here, e.g., were fresh emphases on the materiality of the Supper, its nourishing, sustaining, and empowering force in and for here and now, and its poignant witness to the brokenness of bodies and spilling of the blood as the way of this world that God in Jesus Christ grieves for and overturns.⁹

6. Regarding issues of practice, my Theology Commission experience has led me to bemoan the lack of reliable sociological data on what's going on in our church, not to mention historically comparative statistics. A stereotype of the CC (DOC) is that "they have to follow a denominational line," (and I understand that). Yet I find myself, being considered an insider by those considering themselves "outsiders," at something of a loss to figure out what that denominational line might be and if there is one, whether anyone is following it. Issues of practice addressed by the Theology Commission are historic and, by all accounts, current too. Yet as a historical-theologian, I pray for some tolerably firm data about what's really going on out there in congregations associated with all three SCM streams.

7. The most discomforting, or controversial, issues of practice are three: invitation to communion, placement of communion in Sunday corporate worship, and presidency at the Table. Disciples congregations vary on these points, and rather than giving up our ways, lots of us would prefer others to do as we do or, if not that, embrace diversity.

7.1. An “open table” and “hospitality to all” are standard themes of invitation to communion, so far as I can tell. The Commission took the view, which Mark Toulouse (rightly, I think) called “traditional” and “ecumenical,” that baptized believers were in view, although any notion of enforcing some admission-to-communion policy is nearly unthinkable.

The shoe pinches mainly, it seems, with regard to “giving communion” to young, unbaptized children of baptized church members. Disciples churches—accepting infant baptism, as in my view we should—find ourselves in the difficult position of “inviting all” and “fencing out none” but somehow discouraging the participation of unbaptized children of baptized parents who believe in believer’s baptism. My own guess—and no more than that—is that the “pastoral response” will usually fall on the side of letting the families decide. I detect as well among Disciples a current of opinion, maybe strong, that views the Supper as a “converting ordinance.”

7.2 The Theology Commission urged placement of the Lord’s Supper at the conclusion, the “climax” moment, of worship. The question, to my best knowledge, is only one: does the sermon come before communion or vice versa. (I think some word would get around of a congregation beginning worship with a benediction followed by the offertory, anthem, and sermon—skip scripture and communion. But who knows?) The several “liturgical revivals” among Disciples in sync with wider church movements from the turn of the 20th century on have recommended the same. What’s what, and why, I find a puzzle.

7.3 Presidency at the table is an issue reflective of the long history that Newell Williams, my colleague and school President has studied at length. I continue to rely on his work until something more comprehensive and equally insightful comes along. There are evidently lots of Disciples congregations—how many has never been determined!—that consider presidency of their ordained minister at the Table an appalling violation of the biblical priesthood of all believers and the Disciples heritage of non-hierarchical, anti-clerical, equality of ordained and lay members of the church. The representative ministry of the church does not deserve such treatment.

Disciples women who wrote in *Setting the Table*, however, alert us to a grassroots reality I for one would not care to overlook. I put it more forthrightly, less diplomatically, than they did. We

Disciples betray our Christian calling to be church if our supposedly high-minded, biblical-theological, debates over presidency at the Lord's Supper end up another instance of shunting women to the sidelines.

Endnotes

¹ Mark G. Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship: The Shaping of Contemporary Disciples Identity*, re. ed. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1977.

² Paul Blowers and Byron Lambert, 'The Lord's Supper,' Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement, ed. Paul Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnivant, Douglas A. Foster, and D. Newell Williams (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 490-96.

³ Paul. A. Crow, Jr. and James O. Duke, editors. *The Church for Disciples, Seeking To Be Truly Church Today: A Report and Resource by the Commission on Theology, Council on Christian Unity* (St. Louis: Council on Christian Unity by Christian Board of Publication, 1998), 140.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁹ Rita Nakashima Brock, Claudia Camp, Serene Jones, *et. al.*, eds. *Setting the Table: Women in Theological Conversation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1995).