

The Law, Order and Vulnerability of Communion

(Shared Vulnerability in Covid-19)

The usual practices of the gathered church, especially sung worship and the sharing of communion are highly conducive to the transmission of the Covid-19 virus. This means that church gatherings are likely to be stopped for almost a year. If no vaccine for Covid-19 is found it might mean that church gatherings will be halted for even longer. Congregations are meeting online through various social networks like FaceBook, Instagram and WhatsApp or via video conferencing facilities like Zoom and Skype. Augmented reality and social networking will soon combine to create virtual connection points that are as lifelike as possible. Of interest right now is the question of at what point would the Methodist Church of Southern Africa be able to offer sacraments through these virtual means? And would that be appropriate?

In this essay I briefly explore the possibility of making changes to the order of the church of the sake of sharing the sacrament in novel ways. First I briefly examine the development of the Eucharistic Feast as separate from the Love Feast on the basis of matters of Order rather than of Law. That this separation and dogmatization of the Lord's Supper seems to be based on 'order' rather than 'doctrine' and this would indicate that if appropriate the church might be justified in making changes to its practice that would facilitate the 'virtual' sharing of communion. Second there is the question of whether it would be appropriate to do this. There are many arguments to be made about the incarnational importance of physical presence and the experience of communion as a gathered group but I want to look at the way in which we are to hold law, order and communion in vulnerability in a way that truly honours the church's role as body of Christ in the world.

One thing Wesley is known for is his bold willingness to invent new ways of doing things in conflict with the church of his day. Beside field preaching an interesting part of the development story of the Methodist denomination is Wesley's consecration of Thomas Coke

for the role of superintendent¹ of the Methodist Church in the Americas in 1783. One of the reasons for this ordination was the cry that “thousands of children remained unbaptized” and some members of Methodist societies “had not partaken of the Lord’s Supper for many years” (Heitzenrater 1995, chap. 6). The consecration of Coke and ordination of Methodist ministers that followed made it possible for sacraments to be administered in the growing American church. But it also led to the formalization of divisions between the Methodist Church and the Anglican Church.

In one sense it follows that the sacramental practices might be changed to facilitate reception of the sacrament in novel ways. But, in the case of Wesley’s consecration of Coke and the subsequent establishment of an order of ministers in America it is important to note that sending a hand written order of service and preserved and consecrated elements from Wesley to a church in America was not considered as an option. The church needed a Presbyter to preside at the table and to be physically and contemporaneously present².

The Early Methodist Church was innovative in establishing the church in America especially for fear of a sort of sacramental starvation for those without access to ordained ministers. The Methodist tradition understands the need to break from tradition from time to time. As interesting as this might be Albert Outler points out that Wesley’s distinctive use of tradition as an authority for theological discernment was not based on the tradition of the Church of England but rather on the tradition of the church of Antiquity (or the Early Church)³.

A survey of the practice of the early church seems to show that that it was matters of order and not law or dogma that led to the Lord’s Supper being seen as a meal separate from the early love feast and strictly presided over by a presbyter or bishop. Ignatius, a first century bishop in his letter to the Smyrneans insists:

“Let no one do anything involving the church without the bishop. Let that eucharist be considered valid that occurs under the bishop or the one to whom he entrusts it. 2. Let the congregation be wherever the bishop is; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there also is the universal church. It is not permitted either to baptize or to hold a love feast without the

¹ Wesley ordained Coke as ‘superintendent’ drawing on the New Testament word ἐπισκόποις which is translated as overseer or bishop.

² In considering whether it would be acceptable to consecrate the elements via electronic broadcast it must also be considered whether it would be acceptable for this broadcast to be pre-recorded? Or must it be a ‘live’ broadcast?

³ Wesley’s quadrilateral as described by Outler (1985, 10) emphasizes ‘Christian Antiquity’ as the proper locus of tradition.

bishop. But whatever he approves is acceptable to God, so that everything you do should be secure and valid."

– Letter of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans 8 (circa 100AD) (Ehrman 2003: 305)

Thus the bishop becomes in a sense a representative of Christ's presence to the church but it is important to note that the bishop may 'entrust' the eucharist to someone else. Beyond that Ignatius seems to indicate a certain amount of flexibility of practice in that the bishop may approve and innovate. At this stage it seems The Didache, another important document with evidence for a formalised Eucharist does not seem to insist that the Eucharist is presided over by a presbyter / episkopos even though in Chapter 15 it gives instruction for the congregational⁴ election of bishops and deacons (Ehrman 2003: 439-441). This might be because the order described by Ignatius is generally assumed or it might be the case that the congregation operates according to the synagogue structure of first century Judaism by which a leader would be appointed most probably on the basis of patronage and this leader would be the host of the supper when shared (Giles 1997: 219-26). Banks (1993, 134) writes: "The epistles and New Testament do not seem to make distinctions about who presides at the Lord's Supper. Nowhere in Paul's letters, disputed or undisputed, is anyone identified as the presider or celebrant of this meal. Most probably this was undertaken by the host or hostess of the meeting in whose home the meal was being held." It is clear that in the early church the tradition of a formal 'Lord's Supper' developed gradually for the sake of order. The formalization of this order seems to have been for the sake of unity as described in Ignatius' epistle to the Smyrneans.

In the Methodist Church of Southern Africa the minister's role at the communion table is not a so much a matter of doctrine as it is a matter of order. Doctrine pertains to the right glorification of God and right Theology. Order has to do with the practice of the church that stems from that doctrine. As the recently (and more appropriately) renamed *Book of Order*⁵ declares:

*"Because the Holy Communion is an act of the whole Church, **the celebrant is a Minister whose call from God has been recognised by the church as a whole** and who has been set apart by ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacrament."*
(MCSA 2016, para. 1.26, **emphasis mine**)

⁴ In this case 'congregational' should not be understood to described modern individualized church governance (Giles 1997, 219–26).

⁵ Which used to be called *The Law and Discipline*

Order⁶ is discerned and determined through the church's often cumbersome administrative processes. It takes a long time to deliberate on a decision that has to do with the religious and spiritual lives of millions of Christians. And because this is a distinctively human process sometimes Order and Doctrine are so deeply intertwined that the one may be mistaken for the other. Sometimes order is abused and sometimes it is oppressive – order is expressed as dogma rather than spiritual (λογικὸν) wisdom. This may happen where the sacrament is wrongly used as a disciplinary instrument being withheld from those who have not paid their dues or whom the leaders of a certain society have found 'unworthy.' It is impossible to defend these practices with good Theology and so instead of rightly and transparently discerned or described in a way that brings illumination and liberation dogma is described in ways that result in obfuscation, oppression and heinous forms of spiritual manipulation and abuse.

Rather than dogma the *Book of Order* is an agreement between Methodists about how we 'do' church in a way that unites us. It is an agreement that is always open to amendment and debate. The processes and procedures that allow for the amendment and debate of this order are not always the most efficient and clear and they are certainly not incorruptible. It is easy to see how an institution's decision making processes can evolve to preserve the institution rather than the mission of that institution. Wesley's bold decisions with regard to the formation of the Methodist Church in America indicate his willingness to break with the tradition of the institution for the sake of sharing the gospel and edifying the church. Even Wesley's bold decisions were not made without thorough going consultation. Among the first acts of the newly formed Methodist Church in America was to hold a conference to establish its order.

⁶ An example of this kind of Order that is not law or doctrine may be found in some of Paul's instructions to the churches of the New Testament:

"...let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you. This is my rule in all the churches" (1 Corinthians 7:17)

Paul is writing about whether converts should continue in marriage to their unbelieving husbands or wives. He doesn't have a *law* for this but instead makes his own recommendation or instruction based on his argument in the preceding verses. This is his 'rule'. The Greek word is διατάσσω which Louw and Nida (1989) interpret as "to order, to instruct, to tell, to command." It is a rule for which he does not claim some higher spiritual authority. He presents this rule as a proposition to the Corinthian church and they are welcome to keep it or leave it.

Liberating rules need the assent of the community that makes and keeps them.⁷ Church leadership needs to be ‘duly authorized’ in order to have due ‘authority.’ Authority can be such an oppressive word depending on where that authority is derived ‘authority’ in church should have only the best connotations finding its root in the servant leadership of Jesus. In the example of the earliest church. In the Methodist Church of Southern Africa ‘Authority’ theoretically comes from the people of the Methodist Church who in their Book of Order and Minutes of Conference outline a transparent decision-making process. This decision making process incorporates the church in all of its meetings, synods and Conference.⁸

It is this ‘Conference’ or ‘Fellowship’ that makes its own ‘rules’ and order. As such it must hold its order in humility. An example of this kind of humility is found in the earliest church. In the letter to the Gentile Christians of Acts 15:23-29 the Jerusalem church under James, Peter and the apostles is able to use humble language: “...it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you...” (Acts 15:28). This church has humbly discerned their solution which they feel is in harmony with the prompting of the Holy Spirit and the agreement of the congregation. The word for seemed ‘δοκέω’ is described by Louw and Nida (1989, para. 31.29) as “to regard something as presumably true, but without particular certainty—‘to suppose, to presume, to assume, to imagine, to believe, to think.’” The church of Acts establishes an order through consultation and “consent of the whole church” and they hold it in humility or perhaps vulnerability. This order is not held as a matter of dogma. This humble discernment is captured beautifully in the words of James who says: “...the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere” (James 3:17).

⁷ “By imposing their word on others, they falsify that word and establish a contradiction between their methods and their objectives. If they are truly committed to liberation, their action and reflection cannot proceed without the action and reflection of others.” (Freire 2000, 126)

⁸ Although participation of the congregation in decision making and even in the ordination of ministers is greatly stressed there are often interesting changes. In the ordination service of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (1975 Liturgy) the President (Bishop) asks the congregation:
 “Do you believe that they are by God’s grace worthy to be ordained?
 The people answer: They are worthy.” (Methodist Church 1975, G7)
 At the 2019 ordination the liturgy was different:
 The Presiding Bishop addresses the congregation:
 “...By the grace of God we declare that they are worthy to be ordained. Will you uphold them in their ministry?” Does this use of a liturgy closer to the 1936 liturgy reflect a movement away from the acknowledgment of the wider church’s participation in the ordination of ministers and deacons?

Brené Brown writes of the power of vulnerability and stresses the importance of understanding the dynamics of vulnerability as true strength she writes:

When discussing vulnerability, it is helpful to look at the definition and etymology of the word vulnerable. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word vulnerability is derived from the Latin word vulnerare, meaning “to wound.” The definition includes “capable of being wounded” and “open to attack or damage.” Merriam-Webster defines weakness as the inability to withstand attack or wounding.” (Brown 2015, 67)

Perhaps the earliest church that met in homes was so robust because in faith it was willing to become vulnerable. To meet together as a church was to become vulnerable to persecution but even in the midst of persecution they were able on matters of doctrine to admit that they didn't know for sure – but “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” It was in vulnerability that Jesus established his supper, washing the disciple's feet – dipping his bread in the same bowl as the one who would betray him. It was in vulnerability that his disciples saw him sweating and praying for the cup to be taken away. It is through his wounds and in some way – our participation in his wounds - that we are healed (1 Peter 2:24 / Isaiah 53:4-6).

In vulnerability the church at Corinth protected and promoted the letter from Paul that strongly rebuked them for their practice at the Lord's Supper. As if to prove the point of the importance of woundedness for the church which is the body of Christ this letter to the Corinthians becomes one of the chief scriptures that guide us in the practice of the Lord's Supper:

“²⁰ When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. ²¹ 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's critique of this early church is its marked lack of shared vulnerability in its love feast / eucharist. To share a meal is to share in vulnerability. In this church some people go ahead and get drunk while others experience pangs of hunger. Covid-19 in the 21st century points to a terrifying lack of shared vulnerability in the world and in the church. In America the daily headlines point out that the most vulnerable to the Corona virus are ‘front line workers’ in meat packing plants, grocery stores and frail care centers. These people are vulnerable not just because of their daily exposure to the virus as they work but also because of the co-morbidities like diabetes and hypertension that are associated with poverty, stress and lack of access to health care. In education children with access to technology and internet are able

to continue with their schooling while those who are disadvantaged have to wait and see what the year will bring. In South Africa deaths from Covid-19 will probably disproportionately effect the poor just as it has in America.

Perhaps the Covid-19 crisis is a stark reminder that without shared vulnerability the meal that we eat might not be The Lord's Supper.

The church might not be able to share communion for a long time. Technological and practical implications could probably be easily overcome. In overcoming these barriers we need to make sure that we are not overcoming barriers to practical sharing of communion with some people. But that we are making sure that we maintain vulnerability in sharing. Geographical circuits do not take away the problem of habitual social distancing in the church today. Even societies like the one I serve are onedivided⁹ by language, culture, and financial status. It is easy to make changes to order and even to ritual. In the case of The Lord's Supper there may be a way to adapt our practice to suit the modern Covid-19 situation but whatever ways are developed it will not be the Lord's supper unless somehow it is a true expression of shared vulnerability.

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⁹ The Methodist Church likes to call itself One and Undivided - I suggest that its divided oneness might be expressed better as "onedivided"

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