

“The Essentials”

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love.

Essential #1 1

Rituals that touch the Holiness of God

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Matthew 26:20-46 *When it was evening, he (Jesus) reclined at table with the twelve. And as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" He answered, "He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." Judas, who would betray him, answered, "Is it I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said so."*

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same.

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

Christians believe that during his life on earth, Jesus instituted certain rituals that assist us in remembering Him and in participating in His life. These rites are sometimes called ordinances or sacraments, tangible signs of God's invisible holiness and grace.

Some of the other Christian essentials that we have examined thus far are controversial to the non-Christian world, but are held in virtual unanimity by Christians. This essential has been highly controversial, but mostly **within** the Church and **among** Christians.

Christians have fought, churches have split, and new denominations have been formed over **how** these rituals are to be administered: whether baptism, for instance, should be by sprinkling, pouring, or dunking; whether it should be for adults only, for infants, or for children of a certain age and what age; whether baptism should involve cold running water, or whether a heated baptistry or small baptismal font were appropriate; and on and on. Christians have fought over

what these rituals mean: whether the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper actually transform into the body and blood of Jesus; whether they are nothing more than remembrances of Jesus's sacrifice; or whether Jesus is spiritually present in them (The Lutherans and Presbyterians are separate denominations today because their founders could not agree on what the Lord's Supper meant, and so something that Jesus instituted to bring his followers together ended up driving them apart). Christians have fought over *who* could legitimately participate in the rituals, with some churches extending the "privilege" of participating in the Lord's Supper only to adults who understand the Lord's Supper in the approved way, whose lifestyle is "worthy," and/or who belong to that particular church.

Finally, Christians have also fought over which and how many of the possible rituals were actually instituted by Jesus and are to be observed by the church. Many Protestant churches observe three such rituals: the Lord's Supper, Baptism, and the preaching of God's Word. The Roman Catholic Church has seven added to the Lord's Supper and Baptism: Marriage, Confirmation, Last Rites, Ordination (setting apart to the priesthood), and Confession. Some contemporary groups seem to have added musical praise and worship to the list of ordinances, for during the "praise and worship" is when they experience corporate intimacy with God. The emphasis on praise and worship music, however, initiated the "worship wars" in many churches at the end of the 20th century. Some groups have hated the controversy and sought to eliminate disagreement by limiting the rituals to just one: the preaching of the Word of God. One group, the Quakers (or Society of Friends) in their strictest observance, did away with all the ordinances entirely. In their meetings people sit in silence waiting for the Spirit to move one of their number to speak, with the result that many meetings are completely silent—and the exercise of silence becomes for them a concrete means for God's grace and holiness to be felt (that is to say, silence becomes sacramental).

My conclusion is that Jesus himself is to blame for much of this chaos, except that He evidently doesn't believe it is chaos but rather Christians exercising the freedom that He won for them on the cross to be led in diverse ways by the Holy Spirit into an experience of God's love. Notice that in Matthew's version of the Last Supper, Jesus gives no commandment at all regarding the observance of this, the most solemn ritual at the center of the practice of the Christian faith. Here, he doesn't say, "Do this in remembrance of me." I am not saying that the versions where he does say those words are wrong, but that Matthew correctly captures the non-directive way in which Jesus institutes this simple act.

The rituals that Jesus is involved in are all indeed simple, and NO church observes all of them. The Old Testament required a professional class of priests to carry out the complicated rituals and numerous specialized sacrifices described in Leviticus. Jesus says simple words over bread and wine, and you get the impression that He could just as easily have used tortillas and Coke if that had been what was available. He uses water and a towel to show Christianity's ideal of humble servanthood, and many churches have an annual footwashing service, considering that ritual to be on par with baptism and the Lord's Supper. Jesus also follows a simple ritual of spitting into a bit of dirt to make mud with which to heal a person's (physical and spiritual) blindness, and although that could presumably have been intended for an ordinance, I am not aware of any church that has followed the example of Jesus in this case.

There is something else that is very curious about the way Matthew describes the institution of the Lord's Supper. The supper is immediately preceded by Jesus confronting Judas with his planned betrayal. You will also notice that Jesus confronts Judas, not before, but in the midst of the Supper. The gospel of John seems to imply that Judas left the Supper before it was over, but nowhere does the Scripture say that Jesus forbade Judas from participating in the meal.

Although most churches try to keep the Supper sacred by guidelines regarding who should and should not receive the bread and cup, Christianity's bedrock conviction is that NONE of us is worthy to participate but that by grace Jesus invites ALL into fellowship with himself.

The curiousness of Matthew's narrative continues after the Supper, because it is followed immediately by Jesus declaring to Peter that Peter will deny Jesus three times. When Jesus, who is terribly upset and depressed at the prospect of having to face his suffering and death, comes to the garden of Gethsemane to pray, the disciples are unable even to stay awake during the ordeal.

The center of the passage, and the key to the significance of any rituals that Jesus instituted for the church to remember Him, is this statement by Jesus: "The Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." We want to love God with all our hearts, souls, and might, but our bodies and the desires wrapped up in our bodies conspire against us. Our bodies, and our minds that are so preoccupied by what our bodies demand, need to be reminded that Jesus Christ has bought us on the cross, and that God's love is what now orients our lives. The ordinances are those reminders.

I have been remembering a very special moment this week: the moment in which I was first allowed to kiss Ceci, my wife (this illustration is brought to you by special permission from the owner, any duplication or retransmission of this illustration without written permission is strictly prohibited). It was a special moment in which I was allowed to touch her holiness. Ceci is special (holy) and must not be touched in that way by anyone whom she has not given permission. Would that women in our own age (and men, too, for that matter) would rediscover their holiness! God is special and holy as well, and Jesus, who is God the Son, sought very simple and special ways for His followers to touch God's holiness. This is what an ordinance is all about.

In a traditional Disciples church, we celebrate the Lord's Supper every week, and traditionally we ask non-professionals to lead the ceremony (TWCC has moved to having clergy give the words of institution as an expression of the solidarity of the clergy with clergy of other churches). My brother Daniel, who had spent years away from the Disciples, rediscovered something in his religious heritage when was serving as a missionary in Oaxaca, Mexico, planting churches in Indian villages. Many churches that he had served with emphasized the power of contemporary music, professionally performed, to bring people close to God. In the Indian villages Daniel discovered there was no electricity to power the sound systems, and no professional musicians to play even if the sound system could be powered. Furthermore, he had little time to train people, certainly no time to train them how to preach or play an instrument. He found, however, that it was a simple thing to teach a young man or woman to break bread and say "Jesus said, this is my body broken for you." It was a simple thing to teach one of the leaders to take the new believers down to the river, to ask "Do you believe Jesus is the Son of God who saved you from your sins and have you given Him your heart?", to declare "I baptize you in the Name of the Father, Son, and Spirit," and to put them under. When these simple acts are performed by people who yearn to be close to God, they are powerful, AND they are truly simple enough for ANYONE to understand and perform.

Scholars have not been able to reconstruct exactly how the New Testament church worshipped. I believe that this is the way God intended it. God intended for different Christians in different times and places to worship differently and to find in the example of Jesus different rituals that are meaningful to their relationship with God. Jesus certainly DID intend for us to use such rituals, for he knew that our spirits, joined as they are to our bodies, needed physical reminders to strengthen our awareness of God's love for us. However, Jesus also wanted the emphasis to be on that awareness of God's love, not on the rituals themselves.

This has a practical implication for the way we live our lives as individuals and in communities. We have freedom to look into the Scriptures to find practices that will serve us in our friendship with God. We have freedom to adapt these practices to our needs. In employing our freedom let us be both respectful and tolerant of other Christians. Let us recognize in humility that, unless God rescues our rituals from becoming pointless, routine, or fanatic, we might find ourselves in the position of the disciples who slept while Jesus agonized, or Peter who denied Jesus, or Judas who betrayed Him. Let us pray that Jesus will himself bless and modify our rituals, so that He can come to us time and time again to wake us up from our spiritual sleep when He is trying to accomplish something with us. Above all, may the ordinances that we observe be so special, that in them we may come to touch the very holiness of God.