

# Roots of Reformed Worship

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## Bucer's Eucharistic Liturgy

Martin Bucer played a central role in the strife between the Lutherans and the Zwinglians concerning the Lord's supper. Though at first he was identified as a champion of the Zwinglian cause, later he engaged in extended efforts to find a reconciliation between these two approaches to the nature of the supper. His efforts at mediation were only partially successful. As a result of those efforts, he developed with his younger protégé John Calvin an emphasis on the nature of the Lord's supper that would become the distinctive emphasis of Reformed theology.

Luther's doctrine of the supper stressed the real presence of Christ in the supper. For Luther, Christ was objectively present. This presence was not dependent on the faith of either the celebrant or the recipients. Zwingli and his followers were more concerned to emphasize the necessity of faith on the part of the recipients. From Luther's perspective, Zwingli's formulations sounded like a denial of the objective character of the sacrament. From the other side, what the Swiss heard in Luther's formulations was an insistence on the physical presence of Christ that undermined the spiritual reality of the supper. What the Swiss saw in Luther was the danger of a return to what they regarded as the crass materialism of the medieval church. Bucer's efforts at a *via media* produced in his theological formulations and liturgical forms an emphasis that was on the real communion of the believer with Christ by faith. As Calvin would express it, "In His sacred Supper He bids me take, eat and drink His body and blood under the symbols of bread and wine. I have no doubt that He will truly give, and I receive." (Institutes, Book IV.17.32)

This distinctively Reformed emphasis on the supper as communion can be seen clearly in Bucer's *Psalter with Complete Church Practice* of 1539. Structurally, Bucer's liturgy completely dispensed with the offertory. The effect of this was that the service had no break between the intercessory prayers that followed the sermon, and the Lord's supper. (The Lord's supper was celebrated weekly in the cathedral and monthly in the parish churches.) For the celebration of the supper a eucharistic prayer was added to the standard intercessions. This prayer concluded with the Lord's prayer said in unison. Following this prayer there was to be a brief exhortation on the nature of the supper and the necessity of faith if such concerns had not already been addressed in the sermon. Then the words of institution were read. The bread and wine were distributed. A psalm was sung by the congregation after partaking. The service concluded with post-communion prayer by the pastor, a prayer of thanksgiving, and the benediction from Numbers 6:24ff.

The effect of such an order, and of the phrasing itself, was to place the stress on the believer's communion with Christ. In his prayer over the bread and cup, Bucer says, "And since for our sake he has not only offered his body and blood on the cross to you for our sins, but also wishes to give them to us for food and drink unto eternal life, grant that we may accept his goodness and gift with complete longing and devotion, and faithfully partake of and enjoy his true Body and Blood – even himself, our true Savior..." (*Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed*, p. 210). For Bucer the supper was not a bare symbol and its value was more than that of a subjective reflection. Rather, in the supper the believer partook and enjoyed the true body and blood of Christ. In the ceremonial as well

as the wording, Bucer's liturgy stressed the congregation's participating, not the celebrant's consecrating. Calvin and all the later Reformed creeds agreed with Bucer on this emphasis. While in the Reformed faith the supper is a memorial (and Bucer's liturgy includes this thought), it is never a bare memorial, but also a true communion with Christ, and with his body and blood. Bucer made this thought central to his liturgy, as did Calvin. In fact, Calvin's liturgy has even a greater stress on the believer's participation in Christ. A century later the Westminster confession continued this pattern by interpreting the supper as a true communion with the body and blood of Christ while denying that this is accomplished by some localized, physical presence of Christ in the elements of the meal. "Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, **really** and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually, **receive**, and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of His death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine, yet, as **really**, but spiritually, **present** to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to be their outward senses." (29:7)

Bucer's emphasis on the supper as communion with Christ by faith is an important emphasis that needs to be recovered in conservative Presbyterian celebrations of the supper. Far too often the concern to exclude any notion of a physical presence produces a bare memorialism in the minds of the congregation. Since Presbyterians have no prescribed liturgy, it is very easy for the pastor to allow the concern to exclude a Roman Catholic interpretation to predominate. Such a practice falls significantly short of the strong positive emphasis of Bucer, Calvin, and the Westminster Confession for the believer's true communion with Christ, with his body and blood, in the supper. The brevity and clarity of Bucer's liturgy shows us that it is not difficult to keep the emphasis where it belongs in the administration of the supper. We would do well to learn from him in this matter.

However, another feature of Bucer's liturgy is less worthy of emulation. From the perspective of the history of liturgy, it is strange that the language of thanksgiving is postponed until after the people's

communion. Even in the post-communion thanksgiving prayer, only the first sentence is a thanksgiving and then the prayer reverts to intercession. Most of the other Reformed liturgies have followed Bucer in neglecting a prayer of thanksgiving and blessing over the bread and cup. Such a neglect falls short of the biblical teaching.

The witness of the New Testament is very clear on this matter. Jesus took the bread and the cup, and he gave thanks. In narrating the words of institution Luke uses *ευχαριστω* (give thanks) for the prayer over the bread and by implication for the cup. Matthew and Mark use *εωλογεω* (bless) for the bread and *ευχαριστω* for the cup. Paul uses *ευχαριστω* in his citation of the words of institution, but *εωλογεω* in his interpretive comments in 1 Corinthians 10:16. In that passage Paul calls the cup a "cup of blessing which we bless." The terms *ευχαριστω* and *εωλογεω* have a well established signification in first century Judaism. They were addresses to God acknowledging and praising him for his benefits. They were not primarily intercessory. This can be seen in the language of the Septuagint, the prayers of first century Judaism, and in early Christian eucharistic prayers. In light of these considerations, it is sadly true that the Reformation liturgies have no adequate blessing or thanksgiving over the bread and cup. The prayers provided are primarily intercession for proper reception, not thanksgivings for the gift of Christ crucified and risen. This defect can still be seen in many contemporary Presbyterian administrations of the supper. Regrettably, the legitimate Reformed concern for worthy participation is often not balanced by the equally legitimate concern to bless or give thanks to God.

Biblically speaking the prayers over the bread and cup ought to be primarily thanksgivings and blessings, not intercessions. This biblical emphasis needs to be recovered in contemporary Reformed celebrations of the supper. Such a recovery will go a long way to overcome the mournful, funeral-like emotional atmosphere that so often characterizes the way Reformed churches celebrate the feast of the New Covenant. While the supper is serious, it is not mournful. It ought to be a joyful remembering and giving thanks for the once for all death of Christ, and a spiritual feeding on his body and blood unto eternal life. Bucer's liturgy

reminds us of the importance of the later, and its defect teaches us to do better in regard to the former. ✕

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