

Remembering along the Lines of God's Reminding through John
Pastor Ostella
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Introduction

As we come to worship here this morning, we are already at the table of the Lord and He is present with us in a special and distinct sense. He is present with us everyday and every Lord's Day but He is present with us in a unique way when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. This sacrament is a God ordained means of grace through which we receive special nurture from the bread of life, our risen Savior, Jesus Christ the Lord. (He is present everywhere and all the time but He is with His people in way that is special and distinct from His presence with unbelievers. There is likewise a specialness about His presence with us in worship on the Lord's day that is distinct from His presence with us in our worship on the other days of the week. And there is a further specialness and uniqueness about His presence with us in worship at this table. The sacrament is a unique means of grace).

I think it will help us participate properly and profitably if we do three things. First, we should think *about the table* and orient our minds to its central focus. Second, we should hear *from the Lord* and orient our thoughts to a God-centered remembering. Third, we should then *respond by faith* taking the elements in full awareness of what we are doing. These things overlap but they can be outlined in this way (for example, we participate by faith from beginning to end; thus this pattern is not hard and fast but it is a rough and ready way to grasp what we are doing for worshipful and thoughtful participation).

1A. First, think with me *about the table* and its *central focus*

It goes without saying that the focus of communion is the Lord Jesus who said, "Do this in remembrance of me." Who would dispute this? Surely, no Christian will argue with this focus. However, there are ways that we come to the table with blurred vision. Let me cite three.

1) Communion is out of focus when we make self-examination central. It will be present but it is not primary but secondary, even a sub-point. Why do I say that self-examination blurs our vision? It should be obvious. If we accent *self-examination*, we are remembering *self* rather than the Lord Jesus. But we are to remember *Him*; He said remember *me*.

2) Communion is out of focus when we try to work up our emotions.

Remembering is out of focus when we come to communion for some kind of emotional high that we work up, say, by imagining what it was like for Jesus to die on a Roman cross. Here I refer to giving the imagination free reign to excogitate (generate from one's own mind) remembrances. He told us to remember but He also said the Holy Spirit would give authoritative remembrances to the apostles who would share these remembrances with the church as part of her foundation (cf. Jn. 14:26; 15:26-27 with Eph. 2:20).

3) Communion is out of focus when we make the table a "tack on" to a regular service. I mean by this that it is difficult to fruitfully remember the Lord Jesus if we do some combination of three things: a) if we restrict communion remembering to seven or eight minutes at the end (or beginning) of worship, b) if we fragment that time with an accent on self-examination, and c) if we neglect to center our remembering on the remembrances of Christ given in the Gospels. Granted, all of Scripture points us to Christ but to appreciate that fact we must see all of Scripture through the Gospels as a prism. The Gospels give us distinct reminders regarding the person and work of the Lord Jesus. They describe His mission and accomplishment. They bring

Him before us in His humiliation and exaltation as a person from the past (the historical Jesus) who abides with us to the end of the age because of His resurrection from the grave.

Even more frequent communion observance will not lead to more remembering if we do not *spend time remembering Him along the lines of God's reminding* in the Gospels. Through this prism we will see all the colors of Scripture more clearly. We need to spend time, spend time remembering, spend time remembering Him, and spend time remembering Him alone the lines of God's reminding.

Furthermore, stress on God's reminding answers some reformed groups who tend to play down remembering as man-centered. They stress what God does in the sacrament sealing and confirming our faith (they stress His voice, what He says). These are good and necessary perspectives. So how do we reply? How do we avoid a man-centered remembering? We avoid being man-centered in our remembering by listening to God's reminding especially but not exclusively found in Gospel-History (for more on "why is communion often a 'tack on' in both reformed and nonreformed circles?" see the appendix to this sermon).

2A. Now, second, let's remember the Lord Jesus along the lines of God's reminding.

I want to do this from the perspective of the Gospel of John.

1B. The divisions of the book present Christ as light and life for sinners in darkness. Thus the book presents Him *bringing light and life to sinners* in darkness in two summary ways: 1) in His preaching mission announcing the gospel in both word and deed (chapters 1-12; The signs are visual aids, enacted words from God; they are the gospel preached through deeds, cf. Jn. 12:37-38; He is light being sent to preach in covenant fulfillment, 12:45-47), and 2) in His passion securing the gospel in both word and deed (chapters 13-21, sometimes called Passion Week). The first twelve chapters cover most of the three years of His ministry on earth and the rest of the book begins six days before the final Passover and takes us to a point beyond the resurrection (cf. 12:1, "six days before..."; 12:12, the triumphal entry; 12:23, "the hour has come"; 21:10-14, the 3rd appearance after he was raised from the dead).

John looks back by means of his selective written testimony. There are more signs than the ones recorded (Jn. 20:30). These that are recorded are written for a purpose (20:31), which is twofold: a) to lead to faith in Christ, and b) to give eternal life received by faith. In this we can see that the signs are not simply displays of power and deity but they make up content in the gospel message. As part of what He did (Jn. 21:25; 12:37f.), the miracles define the gospel letting us see it "fleshed out."

2B. The Gospel of John as a whole reminds us of Christ in both His person and work. Here is a summary that ties who He is from the prologue together with what He did in His preaching and in His passion:

Jesus who was with God from all eternity and who was God is the Word, the communication, the expression of God, the sermon. He came forth from heaven, became flesh, and dwelt among sinners in order to reveal God to us, and to gather back to fellowship those given to Him by the Father (cf. Warfield, Theme of John).

Do you remember how John opens the book: "In the beginning was the Word and the word was with God and the word was God...without him nothing was made...in him was life and the life was the light of men" (1:1-4). He shined as light in the darkness but the darkness did not understand, recognize, or receive Him (1:1:5, 10, 11). The darkness hates the light, will not come to the light, and cannot see or enter by faith into the kingdom of God (Jn. 3:5, 19-20).

So why did He come given man's sinfulness? Why this profound event of the Word becoming flesh? It is because the Father had owned a people as His own in electing love and had given them to Christ before the creation of the world to be His own (all the given ones shall come/believe, Jn. 6:37; he calls his own by name, 10:3; the apostles were yours and you gave them to me as well as all believers down through the ages, 17:6, 20, 24). He was given the task to come and accomplish *their* salvation. Thus He was always about the work of doing the will of the Father to be the Passover Lamb that would take away the sin of the world by His death on the cross.

With what mind-set did He come and take up His mission? He came with determined love; He came determined to save the world (3:16-17). He saves by calling each of His own sheep by name from darkness to light (10:3) and from death to life (11, Lazarus come forth!).

So how does He penetrate the darkness? He gives life to whomsoever He will (Jn. 5:21). He does this by the Holy Spirit who brings the new birth from above (Jn. 3:5). Therefore, when He calls His elect sheep and thus effectually gathers them back to fellowship, they believe on His name (Jn. 1:12).

Remember how kind He was to the two followers of John (come and see), to the woman at the well (I that speak to you am he, Messiah, I give the spring of water that wells up to eternal life), to Mary and Martha (I am the resurrection and the life He who believes in me though he shall die yet shall he live; he that lives and believes in me shall never die), to the disciples in the upper room (let not your hearts be troubled, you believe in God believe also in me), to his mother at the foot of the cross (behold your son, John, and John behold your mother, Mary).

Remember His strength in suffering a thousand deaths on the cross. There is no weakness; the "I thirst" is to fulfill Scripture and then having fulfilled His mission on earth, he shouted in triumph: "Finished!"

Do you remember the empty tomb and the grave clothes that testified to the fact that "He is no longer here but is risen." And at the end, there is abiding love for His own. This is powerfully expressed in two ways: 1) in the words to Mary after the resurrection, Jn. 20:16-18, especially: *my* Father in conjunction with *your* Father; by death and resurrection He has accomplished all that was needed to bring us home to fellowship in the family of God, and 2) in the words to Peter to feed my sheep and lambs (Jn. 21:15f.). Now as risen Savior, He sees to the nurture of His brothers and sisters and will nourish us all the way home to heaven.

This is a blessed way to remember the Lord Jesus as the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us as the Passover Lamb of Passover lambs, and who with determined love accomplished our salvation on the cross and through the resurrection. He came into the darkness of this world to bring back to fellowship each one that had been given to Him by the Father before times eternal. In Him was light and the light was the life of men. All given to Him by the Father shall come to Him because His death on the cross secured the effectual drawing of particular sinners from the ocean of death to the ark of safety. To Him be the glory forever, Amen.

3A. What do we now say as we partake of these elements?

There are at least three basic things that we say in the very partaking of the elements.

1B. I need Him (I need the body and blood represented; I have sinned and His work is what I need for my sin). This in effect becomes a prayer to the Lord: "O Lord Jesus, I need you."

2B. I own Him as my very own (I take this bread and wine to my lips and pallet). We come in faith believing in our hearts and confessing with our mouths that Jesus Christ is the risen

Lord of glory. He is the bread of life and by faith we share in His life. Here we say more than He is a great sacrifice, we say He is the sacrifice par excellence. By partaking of the elements we say, "He is my sacrifice, He is my payment to justice before the wrath of God." This too becomes a prayer: "O Lord Jesus, I own you as my very own."

3B. I own His family as my family (there is only one loaf so we being many are one).

We look around us in this gathering and say, "Lord these are your brothers and sisters, so they are my brothers and sisters." We are truly a new family in Christ and it is therefore incumbent on us to take steps to get to know one another better and better. As the WCF puts it, a goal in church life is "the better administration of such ordinances as belong [to us], and the discharge of mutual duties..." in a way "...most expedient for edification" ("The Green Book," Form of Church-Government, 403). This calls us to ask how we can stir up love and good works based on the call to assemble together in Hebrews 10:24-25.

These three things are what you should be saying in your heart as you in fact say these things in your eating and drinking: I need Him, I own Him as my own personal Savior, and I own His family as my family. By faith you partake of a means of grace; without faith you eat and drink judgment to yourself.

In this spirit of being one family under one heavenly Father with one Lord Jesus and one Holy Spirit, let us remember, worship, and fellowship with one another and with the triune God.

Why a Tack-On?

Both reformed and nonreformed tend to lose "remembering" (the meditative process of remembering the Lord Jesus, the Word incarnate, in terms of His humiliation and exaltation).

Why do reformed thinkers lose remembering? A suggestion (and proposed danger) is that it is because of their emphasis on the objective aspect of the sacraments as testimonies from God, means of grace with stress on the real presence of Christ over against a Zwinglian view of communion as a man-centered bare memorial (in both ordinances accent is placed by Zwinglians on what man does: confessing faith in baptism and remembering Christ in communion). In opposing this man-centeredness while stressing the word from God, reformed groups tend, in my judgment at least as a provisional conclusion, to acknowledge but down play the remembering act. This much seems conclusive: when a reformed church places communion after a "regular" sermon (cf. the directions of the WCF on doing this) reflective meditation on the Lord Jesus (remembering Him in acute and distinct focus) is reduced to less than seven minutes, some of which may be taken up with confession of sin and with some momentary interruption of thought to pass the elements. To be sure, any Scripture will ultimately lead to Christ. For example, the Isaac narrative points to Christ. But all Scripture and the Isaac narrative in particular must be understood in terms of the Gospels (through the lenses of the person, life and work of Christ recorded in the Gospels-the remembrances; cf. Jesus I will bring to your remembrance and the early church designation of the Gospels as the remembrances). The Gospels reveal the realization of what was promised in OT and the person and work of Christ recorded in the Gospels is what is explained in the rest of the NT. It does not detract from the rest of Scripture to place an accent on the Gospels *for remembering* the incarnate Word.

Why do Zwinglians tend to lose remembering? They emphasize the memorial (a remembrance). But they still tend to place communion as a tack on after a sermon on any possible topic of Scripture thus inhibiting the process of meditative remembering. They neglect the *process* of actual remembering while accenting the human act of remembering because they lack appreciation for the objective word from God in the sacraments (they neglect the sign as seal or confirmation and they neglect the real presence of Christ; real fellowship with His body and blood, part for whole, with Him in a distinct way in communion). In the sacraments they emphasize man confessing his faith (in baptism) and confessing sin in a memorial ritual pointing to Christ (communion self-examination). The act of remembering is turned into excogitating. Listeners thus lose the remembering process.

Solution

We need to give due place to remembering within the context of reformed emphasis on the objective word from God in the real presence of Christ by the Spirit. What needs to be done is to follow Calvin and go where the signs point us, to the gospel of Jesus Christ through His person and work as the incarnate Word. In other words, communion needs to be practiced as a preaching rite that focuses on the Lord Jesus. Then remembering is accomplished by following the pattern of God's reminding centered in the Gospels that serve as a prism through which to see all the excellencies of Christ in all of Scripture (promised in OT and explicated in rest of NT). This is in keeping with the fact that Jesus said, remember me. This must mean remember the incarnate Word as preacher and accomplisher of redemption in history. We are thus directed to the record of His humiliation and exaltation, from incarnation to ascension (more obviously being given on His present exalted work as high priest in the epistles, Rom. 8, Hebrews, etc.).

In the context of regular preaching and teaching in the life of the church, the implication is that regular communion remembrance of the person and work of Christ forms the big picture as a constant backdrop for work in detail anywhere else in the Bible as the nourishing word of Christ.

This insures great variety both for the communion remembrances and for the detailed preaching on narrow themes week to week. Even preaching through a gospel in a preaching diet is enhanced by this approach because the whole gospel is recollected intermittently while very specific focus is given to detail weekly. For example, a pastor may spend a year preaching through the Gospel of John unit by unit. Sometimes concentrating on one verse like John 3:16 and other times on a whole chapter like chapter 11 on the raising of Lazarus. The time and attention to detail do not exclude reference to the incarnation, death or resurrection of Christ but these things are the backdrop for what is center stage, discussion of a particular part. When communion remembering is center stage then these various details recede to the backdrop, any of which might be mentioned but the detail cannot be covered due to constraints of purpose, time and focus.

Some creative ways of covering the whole picture are needed. One way is telling the narrative by a mixing of reading of Scripture, verbatim quoting, paraphrasing, and telling the story in essence. Hymnal and poetic interpretation also aid getting the big picture and fixing it in the memory as well as rekindling memories by good sound and lyric. An entire Gospel may be preached in one message. This might be done in a series from Gospel to Gospel with a fifth message covering all the Gospels. At an even broader perspective, all the Gospels may be tapped with a theme in mind that reveals the person and work of Christ in history such as His welcoming the disciples, a prostitute, all of us in the high priestly prayer, and into the family (He is my Father and your Father, end of John).

What about weekly communion?

It is usually taken up due to renewed appreciation of the sacraments. A great importance is attached to them, therefore, communion observance once every two years or even once a year is seen as inconsistent with the importance of the sacrament.

My emphasis is such that weekly observance loses the place of communion as a preaching rite in the tendency toward a disconnect between giving attention to details of exposition of the whole counsel of God textual unit by textual unit. If this is done fully then remembering the Lord Jesus is not the accent of the sermon (say, on the 5th commandment-ultimately the message must bring us to Christ but the message must center on the nuances of the 5th commandment to do justice to it as a duty in context of OT-NT and redemption in Christ.). But in preached remembering of Christ all is centered on Him. If the 5th commandment comes into view it does so say when Jesus gives Mary to be cared for by John.