

Worship and Fellowship Together

DAVE BAST

There is an old philosophical paradox that asks: What is the sound of one hand clapping? Well, the point, of course, is that one hand cannot clap by itself; it needs another hand to clap against. Well, here is another question: What is it like for a church to worship as individuals with all its members isolated all by themselves? We have been learning about that paradox lately, and we will talk about it today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, we have said all along this is a four-part series where we are taking a little bit of a different approach. Normally on *Groundwork*, we dig into scripture by going through a book or following some theme, or perhaps one of the creeds of the Church. In this series, we really want to address the things that are going on around us in our societies, in our cultures, in our nations; and they have to do with the pandemic, of course. That is what began it all...made this such a topsy-turvy year...but then, later in the year we have seen outbreaks of protest and civil unrest against racial injustice, centered primarily in the United States, of course; that is where it started because of the killing of George Floyd, that was the spark that set off the explosion; but these protests have spread throughout many countries in the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so we have been thinking in this series. We thought a lot about lament in the first episode; providence: Where has God been through all of this; that was the second episode. This is our third episode, whereas you said, Dave, specifically now, this episode is going to be more about COVID-19 than the racial unrest because it is the COVID-19 that has isolated us in our homes. Now, we are not sure by the mid to late summer and early fall of 2020 where churches will be. There has been reopening. Some churches may be back to some semblance of normal worship, but the point is that for weeks and months, we did not have normal worship. We couldn't; we were not allowed to, and it would have been unwise and un-Christian and un-neighborly to actually gather together because we could infect each other, including our most vulnerable members. So, we stayed home, and churches live-streamed or Facebook-streamed or whatever it was...Skyped and Zoomed worship into our own...

DAVE BAST

YouTube.

SCOTT HOEZEE

YouTube, yes.

DAVE BAST

YouTube services...Vimeo services, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we have all reflected a little bit about things we take for granted, like the ability just to go to church; the ability to be together; and that has led to further reflection like, well, what is the Church? We didn't stop being church because we couldn't be in a brick and mortar building, but what is the role of fellowship? Maybe it is way more important than we realize, right? So, that is the... And what about the Lord's Supper? We will talk about that a little more in the second part of this program. Churches have struggled whether you can do that virtually online or not. So, those are the things we have been thinking about, and that is what we want to reflect on in this program because it has been on our minds. It certainly was prominent in our minds in the early months of 2020.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; and who knows when it will end? So, yes; I mean, one thing I have heard a lot from different people is how thankful we can be that this has happened in the year 2020 when we have these incredible technologies, and that we can learn to be thankful for them. We will talk a little bit about that later in the program, maybe...expand on that a bit...but let's go back to basics first, though, and talk about the nature of the Church as we see that described in the New Testament; specifically, the early Church in the book of Acts.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sometimes, indeed. When our patterns of church get disrupted, as they have been, we go back to basics...we go back to thinking about what is it that the Church does? You are right, Dave. If the pandemic had happened twenty years ago, it would have been much, much more difficult for churches to stream their services or for pastors to record; even using just an iPhone, people have been able to do it; but we have been able to do it and we are thankful for that, but it is not ideal. One of the reasons it is not ideal is what we read in what you just said, the book of Acts.

We read this in Acts 2, right after Pentecost: ⁴²They (the Christians) devoted themselves to the Apostles' teachings and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴⁴All the believers were together. They had everything in common, ⁴⁵selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the Temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God, and enjoying the favor of all of the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

So, there, every day they continued to meet together. Doesn't that sound good...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or didn't that sound good, particularly when we were totally locked down earlier in the year and we couldn't be together at all?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; so, clearly Luke describes four specific, call them marks of the Church, in one verse here: Acts 2:42: They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching...so teaching or doctrine is one of the marks of the Church—the first one that he mentions; and wouldn't it have been great to have Peter there telling you stories about Jesus, you know, a living Gospel, who was there and could relate all those things; or John talking about the love of Jesus; but we still have the Apostles' teaching...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

We call it the New Testament. So, we can do that. And then, fellowship and breaking of bread and prayer...three more marks.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so, *koinonia* is one of those Greek words that people who don't know any Greek know. It is just a word...it means fellowship. It was such an important word for the early Church that that is how it has come into common parlance even in other languages. Koinonia—fellowship—the being together; and when they are together, they would worship together. They would sing together, they would support one another, and certainly the breaking of bread—the Lords' Supper and then prayer; that they were a praying people, and when they were together...now, you can pray anywhere, right? Prayer is that one aspect of public worship that is the most portable, right? We all pray individually; but there is something powerful about praying together. Again, we look at all of these things from Acts 2, and we realize that a couple of those key things were what we have been deprived of during the COVID-19 pandemic.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Fellowship, being able to break bread together, singing together...they even say now singing is dangerous because we expel so much; so some churches are going to re-gather, but not allow singing. What a bummer that is!

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is no good...

SCOTT HOEZEE

But praying together, too.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and you know, you can read the Bible by yourself. So, you can do these things. You can experience maybe communion or fellowship with the Lord by yourself. You can have private times of worship. Even outreach, because you know, to those four marks in verse 42 we need to add the fact that the Lord added daily to their numbers...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, they weren't just inwardly focused, they were reaching out to their community; and what an attractive thing that must have been to see this incredible fellowship; but the real problem is how do you have communion with the body with Christ...with one another...when you are stuck by yourself, or maybe just with your immediate family in your home? Yes, we have tried—we have tried to do all these things virtually. Our community group that we are part of...the small group at our church that we are part of...we have had Zoom meetings on Sunday evenings. So, it is a way to try to help get around the problems caused by quarantine, but not ideal; but specifically, I think we want to ask the question about the breaking of the bread, which refers undoubtedly to the Lord's Supper. How do we handle that in these days? We will talk about that more in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, we have just been talking about the marks of the Church in the book of Acts, which really describe every church, and how we have tried to keep these up in a season of quarantine...of pandemic. It has been difficult, but we can be thankful for the use of technology that is available to us; it wasn't to earlier generations; but now let's talk specifically about the idea of the Lord's Supper or communion, or the Eucharist, as it is sometimes called in some traditions, or the mass in Roman Catholic churches; and of course, Roman Catholics have not been able to partake of the mass because they have not been able to gather with a priest...they need to have a priest...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

In order to do that. We have a slightly different take on it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; many protestants and certainly in the Reformed tradition we do not think the bread and the wine change into anything, and need to be changed by an authorized priest; so, that makes it a little bit different for those traditions; and of course, you know, Dave, when the lockdown first began, we were nearing the end of the season of Lent; and so, the lockdown happened over Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday, the night in which the Lord's Supper was instituted...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And many churches gather to celebrate the Lord's Supper...Good Friday, Easter...all the highest of high holy days in the Christian year were done in quarantine this year in 2020, and that did introduce the question: Can you...should you...may you...temporarily, in extreme circumstance—in *extremis*—can we celebrate the Lord's Supper virtually? Can people gather bread and wine in their own home and sit together, watching the pastors of a church preside, virtually, over the Lord's Supper, and you take, eat...you take, drink...remember and believe...in your homes simultaneously to when the pastors did it in the church sanctuary from which they were sending out the service on video...can you do that? It has been a lively debate, and probably among our listeners are some who have done this, some who could have but refused, some who wanted to but their church didn't allow it; so, there is a great diversity out there.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and churches have certainly approached it differently. Some have just said no, we are going to hold off on that; and as you say, Scott, some have kind of had the pastor appear on camera and sort of trigger that or suggest, and they put words on the screen as you partake of this at home, or they have had a printed liturgy that you are supposed to read to one another. I will just say I don't like it and I haven't participated myself just because of the desire... I am willing to give this up for a season until we can do it properly together. I may change that if it goes on much longer, but that is my personal opinion.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and my family...my wife and son...we did partake communion on Maundy Thursday at our church's Maundy Thursday service. So, we did do that, but I think what we can for sure say, Dave, is this is only temporary. Now, the Church has long said that we could do communion sort of by remote. We would bring communion to homebound people in nursing homes. I did that...one of the first things I did when I became a pastor, an elder and I would go out to about three or four people who could not physically come to church because of disability...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And illness or age; and we would bring them the elements on the same day when the congregation did it. We have made these concessions, but all things being equal, and as we are reminded of in a very important passage from 1 Corinthians 11, we are supposed to be together when we do this, for good reason.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; well, let's just look at that passage, because this is the basic place in the New Testament where the practice and meaning of communion is explained insofar as it is. Of course, in the Gospels we have the story of the Last Supper, as you said, Scott, where Jesus said: This is my body...do this in remembrance of me. This cup is the new covenant in my blood... But it is really Paul in 1 Corinthians who repeats the words of institution and who indicates that this was a normal part of Christian worship, not just a one-off in the upper room; but he does this because of the problems that were being experienced in the Church of Corinth.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A church that had a lot of problems, as you know when you read 1 Corinthians. The letter of 1 Corinthians is Paul's reply to a letter we no longer have, but he got a long letter from the Corinthians saying: Paul, here is a list of our problems; and one of the problems was that when they would gather to celebrate the Lord's Supper, they would do it at sort of the end of the day, because they didn't get Sundays off...right?

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But the rich people could knock off work a lot earlier than the working class poor people; and so, they would have what they would call a love feast...kind of a potluck that included also the Lord's Supper. The problem was, the rich people were eating all of the food and taking all of the bread and wine, and the poor people would show up and there would be crumbs; and Paul says: You know, the Lord's Supper is supposed to solidify the unity of the body...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You guys are doing the opposite. Stop it!

DAVE BAST

Yes; he actually then wrote these really serious, sobering words in 1 Corinthians 11 beginning at verse 27: So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ, eat and drink judgment on themselves.

Whoa! That is a passage that has given a lot of reason to pause to a lot of Christians over the centuries when it comes to the Lord's...you mean taking communion could be harmful to your health?! You could be eating and drinking judgment on yourself?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and we want to make very, very clear, we are not reading this passage here to say that if you have done at-home communion that you ate and drank judgment onto yourself. We recognize that this was an extraordinary circumstance and it is temporary, right? We are not going to keep celebrating the Lord's

Supper this way. We shouldn't want to because we should want to be together. Now, virtually we were together, and hopefully all of us who have done communion at home have done it during the worship service that was being streamed, that a church council or consistory or board authorized, which is important in a lot of circles, and that the pastors were still presiding over in the moment. But, I just mentioned that on Maundy Thursday we, for the first time, my wife and son and I did partake of communion; but after I took the elements, Dave, I had some tears streaming down my cheeks because this isn't the way this is supposed to go. I am supposed to be able to see my sisters and brothers. I am thankful to partake of it; I believe the Holy Spirit was in this; but, I want to be in loving fellowship with our congregation...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because that is what the Lord's Supper reminds us: Jesus died to make us all one body...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Jesus died so that we could have this fellowship with him and with one another; and that is really, in many ways, a key element of the Lord's Supper, and it is what we have most missed...whether we have taken the Lord's Supper at home or refused to or didn't have the opportunity to...we have most missed that communal element.

DAVE BAST

And that is actually the point Paul is making here...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

As he unpacks the meaning of the Supper. When he says: Eat and drink in an unworthy manner or without discerning the body and blood of Christ, he doesn't mean that you have to have a proper theology of the sacraments before you can take communion. We have often used this verse, especially in the Reformed tradition...let's be honest...to turn communion into this rather frightening, even scary, or somber experience...or you better really be careful, and you better really have examined your heart and your life, and you better walk on eggshells up to that table...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And that is not the intent. We have even said, well, let's not celebrate it too often because we might turn it into something... That is like saying let's not eat every day because... No, this is meant to feed our faith...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It feeds us with Christ. We really *do* receive him by faith through the Spirit, but what he is saying there is, you have got to be aware of the body around you...the body of the Church; that is what it is all about; and you Corinthians, you are totally ignoring that. You are treating some members of the congregation as if they

don't matter...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

As if they don't count. So, yes; this has got to be a community activity, and we long for the day when we can once again celebrate it together that way; and speaking of longing for the day, we are going to look at a passage that mentions that in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; this is the third program in a four-program series reflecting on COVID-19, the pandemic, the unrest that the world has seen in the year 2020...a special series we are doing; and Dave, in this program, we are reflecting on what did we learn or what were we reminded of when we couldn't worship together...that is what we were thinking...and when we couldn't take the Lord's Supper together? Many of us did partake of it online, but we just said that is at best a stopgap measure. It is certainly nothing we want to be doing permanently, because we reflect on the fact that we do need each other. We are a fellowship as a Church. A church is more than the brick and mortar building, as many people have said. We haven't stopped being the Church, but we have missed some really important parts of what it means to be the Church.

DAVE BAST

Right; and I think we have said we appreciate the new technology that has enabled us to do as much as we have. Perhaps here is another point. We can think of those Christians in places where that is all they have...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

They cannot gather together. I think of the Church in Iran, a church with which I am somewhat familiar. So, we can remember them in our prayers; and we can look forward to the day when we can return; and maybe not everybody feels the need for that. I have heard some people say: You know, I kind of like this virtual worship. I can just show up in my pajamas. I can leave the room and drink a cup of coffee. I can skip through parts of the service I might not enjoy as much. But no; we need to be together, and we need each other; and there is a great passage from Hebrews Chapter 10 that stresses this point.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁹Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the day approaching.

And Dave, I remember when I was a kid growing up, some of my relatives would use this verse as a reason to argue for going to church twice on Sunday...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right...don't neglect...

SCOTT HOEZEE

You cannot skip the evening service because then...

DAVE BAST

Church is meeting...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Don't give up meeting together; but whether or not is specifically applies to the vesper service or not, it does apply generally to the idea that we are supposed to meet together to spur each other on—to encourage one another—to support one another—to have communion together, as we said in the previous segment—to sing together—pray together. Being together in the *koinonia* that we thought about in the first segment of this program is vital to who the Church is.

DAVE BAST

Notice how the writer to the Hebrews puts it. We have this privilege of drawing near to God because of what Jesus has done. His body has been torn like the veil in the Temple. His blood has been shed like the sacrifices of the Old Testament so that we can have access to the Father, and we can come freely; and Hebrews stresses that over and over; come, you know, come; but come together; and it is not just that I need the others of my congregation...of my church...to encourage me. It is that they need me. Encouraging one another, says the writer to the Hebrews. So, you are important, too. You shouldn't go it alone, not only for your own sake, but for the sake of others, too; and all the more, the writer says, as you see the day approaching. So, we are looking forward to that day when we can come back to church, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and again, maybe by the time some listen to this, we have been able to start doing that again in some fashion; but indeed, it is just a reminder...COVID-19 and the pandemic has reminded us of things that, as we have said before, we take for granted; and you know, when the lockdown was first starting, Dave, at my seminary—at Calvin Seminary—it was the week of oral comprehensive exams for our students; and needless to say, this year a lot of students got some COVID-19 related questions, and quite a few students from their various panelists got the question: When this is all done and you are the pastor, what are you going to say to people who say what you said earlier? Hey, I kind of like this stay-at-home church thing. I don't have to scramble to get the kids ready for church. I can be in my pajamas. I am not coming back to church. What are you going to say to people who actually are serious about that? And I do think it is a question some pastors are going to face; not from everybody, but you know, are we willing, ready and able as pastors, as church leaders, as sisters and brothers, to make the argument of why it is important to come together. We cannot let this virtual thing...unless you are sick or for a season, you know, it might happen, but all things being equal, we really do want this to end so that we get back to the fellowship.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; we are embodied creatures, and we need one another. You cannot hug a screen, as they say. So, as we see the day approaching when we can return to church, yes; but even more so *the* day—the day of the Lord, Hebrews says. That is when all things will be made new; thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast. We hope you will join us again next time as we discuss biblical themes of justice; themes that shape our Christian response to the injustices of COVID-19, and calls for public justice. We encourage you to connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com. Share what *Groundwork* means to you and tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/worship-and-fellowship-together>

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