

Celebrating the Sacraments During Quarantine

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A long, long time ago Christians had a unique and peculiar custom when it came to celebrating one of its most important and sacred practices. A minister would visit each household in the community and inquire into its spiritual faith and personal code of conduct. Depending on the interview, a small round token made of metal or wood would either be given or withheld. This token was to be carried and presented at the next worship meeting. The minister or an appointed church leader would confirm that the individuals holding a token would be allowed to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The idea that one or both of the sacraments were withheld from individuals might appall us today but the practice of administering tokens for the Lord's Supper could be found in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church as late as the twentieth century.

Fast forward one hundred years or more and the Church finds itself in new circumstances where its current practices of celebrating the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and Baptism are challenged. Worship services currently consist of computer monitors, tablets, phone screens, headphones, Bluetooth speakers, integrated camera lenses and microphones. Even if the quarantine measures are relaxed or lifted this week, we have been separated long enough that worshiping publicly together will be gradual for the weeks and months to come *if* our worship experiences ever resembles itself as in the beginning of the year. The new circumstances the Church finds itself in are not intended to purposely withhold either of the sacraments from the life of Church like a token but it has definitely put a wrinkle in the fundamental shape of what worship looks like. We are now confronted with an interesting conundrum: Should we celebrate the sacraments? If yes, what would the celebrations look like?

Before attempting to smooth out the wrinkles made by the quarantine, it may be helpful to define the importance of Christian worship. Worship for Cumberland Presbyterians is seen as the people's service where we are not just observers watching what one or two people are doing but active participants who are engaging in an actual encounter with God and God's people. We participate and contribute through our praises, prayers, singing, reading and listening to the scriptures and committing our life and resources to God. In and through worship we are proclaiming the living presence of God in our world.

The sacraments are central to our worship and to the life of the Church. The Lord's Supper and Baptism are outward signs and testimonies of God's mighty acts manifested in and through Jesus Christ offering us grace, assurance, love, forgiveness, guidance and redemption. In the sacraments we are announcing who God is and what God is doing in our lives; both individually and corporately. The three elements of bread, wine and water tap into several of our senses. We can visually see all three, audibly hear the drink poured from pitcher to chalice, water dripping on head and garments, feel the savory of bread in our mouths, and have the aroma fill our nostrils – all tangible aspects that represent the redemptive acts of God through Jesus Christ. The Lord's Supper and Baptism also serve as signs to help us testify of God's

grace manifested in Jesus to others. We typically celebrate the sacraments in public gatherings, however, is it safe to do so? Who gets to make these decisions and what might these celebrations look like under these new circumstances?

The Directory of Worship for Cumberland Presbyterians gives some guidance on Christian worship. *The Directory of Worship* is located towards the back of the *Confession of Faith for Cumberland Presbyterians*. Depending on which printing one has, the directory section starts on page 82, 86, or 87 in the printings from the last ten years. The intended purpose of the *Directory of Worship* is to serve as a guide to help quantify the importance of Christian worship, identify the different movements of worship, and provide basic resources and suggested ideas to help a gathering of Christians to fulfill a fundamental mission of the Church. The development and ordering of worship is the responsibility of the congregation's session under the leadership of the minister. This responsibility includes determining the worship time, location, type of liturgy, music and recognition of the Church seasons. The responsibility of ordering worship also includes the celebration of the sacraments.

An entire section of the Directory is dedicated to the sacraments and how the Lord's Supper and Baptism are intrinsically tied in Christian worship. For the Lord's Supper the directory states, *the time and place for each celebration of the Lord's Supper is to be set by the church judicatory which has jurisdiction over the group of Christians who are to celebrate the sacrament* (Directory of Worship, Heading II. The Sacraments. Section C. The Sacrament Of The Lord's Supper And Corporate Worship). In life of the congregation, the decision to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, time and location are determined by the session. (Recently, the Office of General Assembly offered an interpretive opinion here:

<https://files.constantcontact.com/1dfb30b3101/944db7da-9ac9-4890-b0df-34f28ecce457.pdf>). How does a congregation celebrate the Lord's Supper during worship while also respecting quarantine efforts?

Sessions have become creative by having the minister(s) or approved elder(s) lead the congregation through video technology. Some have made the decision to record earlier videos of the one authorized to administer the sacrament for members of the church to watch on their own time and celebrate at home. Others have celebrated via technology live where individuals and families at home have provided their own elements of bread and drink. Other sessions have forgone the use of technology for the sacrament and provided the elements within the church sanctuary during certain hours so that individuals and families can "come and go". While other sessions have decided to offer the sacrament in a drive thru fashion so that people can be at a safe distance and remain in their vehicles. Ministers and elders have also delivered single serving elements to those who have remained indoors by choice or necessity and left them at people's doors. For the sessions that have determined to continue to celebrate the Lord's Supper whether weekly, monthly or quarterly, have thought of creative ways to make sure the sacrament is available to those who want it.

For the sacrament of Baptism, the Directory states, *Baptism is an act of worship for the whole church...if there are compelling reasons to administer the sacrament in some other context than*

the regular worship of a congregation, members of the congregation should still be present and scripture, proclamation, prayer and affirmation of faith of the congregation should be part of the act (Directory of Worship, Heading II. The Sacraments. Section A. The Sacrament of Baptism and Corporate Worship). In the life of the congregation the decision to celebrate the sacrament of Baptism in some other context than in worship is determined by the session. How does a congregation celebrate Baptism during worship while also respecting quarantine efforts?

Sessions have become creative by having the minister administer the sacrament of Baptism via technology. Like the Lord's Supper, this is being pre-recorded and made available for the congregation to view later or recorded live so that people can participate in the sacrament. Sessions have included the sacrament of Baptism in their regularly scheduled worship service or have chosen another time when it was beneficial for the individual being baptized and when the congregation could be present.

Can the Cumberland Presbyterian Church celebrate the sacraments during quarantine? The *Directory of Worship* gives guidance to help a session determine what will serve members of the congregation best in terms of spiritual nourishment, health and safety. For some congregations, the decision has been made to wait on celebrating either sacrament until the congregation can physically be present together. The absence and abstaining from the sacraments will only intensify their significance and meaning the next time they are celebrated. For others, to wait on sacraments would mean to deprive the congregation of an integral part of worship. But this article is not necessarily intended for the sessions that have already made a determination of what will help their congregation celebrate the sacraments during quarantine. This is an attempt to help congregations and their leadership who have not come upon their monthly, quarterly or yearly celebration of the Lord's Supper and it is also for the session who is or will be facing how to celebrate a Baptism. Can both approaches to the sacraments mentioned be correct? Well, if one is a Cumberland Presbyterian, the answer is "yes".

Works cited:

Confession of Faith and Government of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church/Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America. Cordova, TN: The Office of General Assembly, 2019.