


7-2015

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Recommended Citation

INTERAÇÕES: Cultura e Comunidade 10.18 (Ago./Set. 2015): 140-161.

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THE EUCHARIST IN AN UNARTICULATED WORLD

A EUCARISTIA NUM MUNDO DESARTICULADO

TIM SENSING^(*)

ABSTRACT

Ethnographic data from the lived experiences of teenagers participating in the weekly observance of the Eucharist provided rich data for an application of Bakhtinian approaches to discourse in order to inform current practice. Bakhtin's understanding of dialogism and heteroglossia asserts that all discourse communities are located in historical situations that involve complex interactions. Each utterance takes meaning from its "actual social life." Bakhtin gives priority to utterances that occur in context and focuses on the intentional negotiation of meaning and interpretation between author and reader, or, in this case, researcher, participant, and community. The research provides opportunity for teenagers to "answer with their lives" the meaning of the Eucharist.¹

KEYWORD: Eucharist. Bakhtin. Dialogism. Heteroglossia.

RESUMO

Os dados etnográficos oriundos das experiências vividas pelos adolescentes que participam semanalmente na eucaristia forneceram dados preciosos para uma aplicação das perspectivas bakhtinianas ao discurso de modo a compreender a prática atual. A compreensão de Bakhtin do dialogismo e da heteroglossia sustenta que todas as comunidades discursivas se encontram em situações históricas que envolvem interações complexas. Cada afirmação assume significado a partir de sua « vida social atual ». Bakhtin dá prioridade às afirmações que ocorrem em contexto e concentra-se na negociação intencional do significado e da interpretação entre o autor e o leitor, ou, nesse caso, entre o pesquisador participante e a comunidade. A pesquisa dá a oportunidade aos adolescentes de « responder com suas próprias vidas » ao significado da eucaristia.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Eucartistia. Bakhtin. Dialogismo. Heteroglossia.

RÉSUMÉ

Les données ethnographiques provenant des expériences vécues par les adolescents qui participent hebdomadairement à l'eucharistie ont fourni des riches données pour une application des approches bakhtiniennes au discours, dans le but d'éclairer la pratique actuelle. Bakhtine comprend le dialogisme et l'hétéroglossie au sein de communautés discursives situées dans des contextes historiques et impliquant des interactions complexes. Chaque énoncé prend son sens de la « vie sociale réelle ». Bakhtine accorde une priorité aux énoncés qui se produisent dans un certain contexte et se concentre sur la négociation intentionnelle du sens et de l'interprétation, menée entre l'auteur et le lecteur, ou, dans le cas présent, entre le chercheur participant et la communauté. La recherche offre la possibilité aux adolescents de donner un sens à l'eucharistie « à travers leur propre vie ».

MOTS CLÉS: Eucharistie. Bakhtin. Dialogisme. Heteroglossie.

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¹ Student researchers attend the Graduate School of Theology, Abilene Christian University and conducted the ethnographies in connection with the course *BIBM 657 Contexts of Ministry*. They collected and analyzed the data for themes and provided contextual analysis of the congregations where the teens resided. In the analysis and the authoring of this paper, the teens, students, and I are co-authors of the utterance. The following paper is not a mere reporting of the understandings teens have, but a larger discourse of teens, churches, literature, researchers, and authors.

Where I attend church, I regularly sit next to the youth group during the morning assembly. Our congregation practices weekly communion. Most of the teens routinely participate in this practice. Sitting in such close proximity to them, I get easily distracted. Some, not all, often whisper, pass notes, giggle, and act in other common teenage behaviors. I have often wondered, “How meaningful is the practice of communion for them?” To address what teenagers within Churches of Christ believe about the Eucharist, there exists the need to return to the immediacy of experience as it is felt within the utmost particularity of a specific life. However, communion is not taken in isolation but in the midst of the larger community whose liturgy includes hymns, prayers, and meditations. Likewise, the liturgy is rooted in the traditions of the particular denomination, the protestant movement, and the community of the saints throughout history. (JOHNSON, 2012, pp. 177-252). The Eucharist practiced each Sunday at my church also finds its meaning in the storied world of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Subsequently, participating in a weekly observance of communion gives these teens access to a larger conversation. My own entry into that conversation involved an ethnographic journey of what teens believe and practice about the Lord’s Supper.²

For teens to experience “deed,” they will need to mediate between their lived experiences of the Lord’s Supper and their reasoned representation of the act. My research asks the question, “Are teens able to account or give meaning to the act of participating in weekly Communion?” Or as Mikhail Bakhtin says, “For as much as I have experienced and understood in art, I must answer with my life, so that what I have experienced and understood in art does not remain without effect in life.” (BAKHTIN, 1990, p. 56).³ Can these teens “answer with their lives” in the context of the act of the Eucharist? Additionally, how do the teen’s articulation of the Eucharist co-author the utterances of other teens within their youth groups or affect the larger dialog of the church? While the teens are not

² According to Moschella (2012, p. 224), “Ethnography is a method for researching and understanding both the gaps and the connections between theology and lived faith practices.” Ethnography is the practice of documenting the history, demographics, stories, traditions, people, practices, and events that happen in a ministry setting and then reflecting on the complexities of those local communities to generate a construction of new knowledge about them. Ethnography is a pastoral practice of paying attention to the story of the community and becoming an informant of its local theology. (pp. 225, 229; see also: MOSCHELLA, 2008; SWINTON and MOWAT, 2006; WARD, 2012; SCHAREN, 2012).

³ See also the discussion on pp. 15-22 and in BAKHTIN, 1984, chs. 1-2.

intentionally shaping the world of the church, they do discover and influence it as they find their place in it.⁴

My approach to analyzing ethnographic data and narrative research emerges from a Bakhtinian approach.⁵ Bakhtin's understanding of dialogism and heteroglossia asserts that all discourse communities are located in historical situations that involve complex interactions. Subsequently, a Bakhtinian understanding of the Eucharist, he would consider in terms of "interpretation (*perichoresis*) and interchange" because "selves exist relationally." (GREEN, 2000, p. 30). Each utterance takes meaning from its "actual social life." (BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 288). Language is not understood in a general, singular or unitary sense; it is always defined in terms of diversity and interchangeability. Bakhtin gives priority to utterances that occur in context and focuses on the intentional negotiation of meaning and interpretation between author and reader, or, in this case, researcher, participant, and community.

When these teens respond to questions, they are answering with their lives. They are constructing their own understanding of the Eucharist by verbalizing what they understand. They are the makers of their own discourse. He recognizes the speaker's rhetorical intention to move the audience to action while maintaining the audience's active role in interpreting utterances in order to reply. Therefore, they constitute their own responsibility for their understandings and their own authority. They have the power to construct their own narrative thus finding their own coherence even in the midst of their convergence or divergence from the larger contextual utterances. The students tell the meaning of Eucharist in their lives. By telling, they are naming, doing, and interpreting their own personal identity, as well as the political act of telling those stories these teens will claim their own place in the world.

Their words brush up against thousands of living dialogical threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around their thoughts on communion. By responding to the questions, the teens cannot fail to become an active participant in the larger social dialog of the congregation. As such, no utterances

⁴ The act of asking questions in an interview affects how the teens will reflect on their self and their participation of the Eucharist. In the process of engagement, the teens will be changed. To what extent the conversation a teen will have with their perceived self and their projected self (alterity), will require further research.

⁵ I have previously articulated my understanding of ethnography and narrational research in *SENSING*, 2011, 1998. My introduction to Bakhtin's use in narrative research is influenced by my dissertation advisor (CASEY, 1993).

to the questions posed can be attributed to the participant exclusively. The words are a product of the interactions of the interlocution as well as the whole complex social situation of the church. Consequently, the teens are part of a larger community and speak a common word that exhibits common verbal patterns—a social dialect. A word in the mouth of a particular individual is a product of the living interaction of social forces within their families, youth groups, congregations, and denominations.

Within any denominational setting, teens enter an ongoing conversation (both locally and historically) about the Eucharist. Included in those settings are the reflected teachings of the church, the congregation, inherited parental beliefs, and the youth ministry. As Smith writes in the *National Study of Youth and Religion*:

In our in-depth interviews with U.S. teenagers, we also found the vast majority of them to be incredibly inarticulate about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives. We found very few teens from any religious background who are able to articulate well their religious beliefs and explain how those beliefs connect to the rest of their lives. (SMITH, 2005, p. 131)

The student researchers assumed Smith's definition.⁶

All the teens who participated in the current study are members of Churches of Christ, a branch of the Stone-Campbell Movement and related to the Disciples of Christ and Christian Churches. The Lord's Supper is a fundamental act of worship in Churches of Christ, (BLOWERS and LAMBERT, 2004, p. 495) as it has been throughout the history of the Christian Church. (WHITE, 2006). It is both an individual and communal activity that is expected at every Sunday morning worship assembly. The centrality of this ritual is demonstrated by its frequent availability at an evening service or in the homes and hospital beds of those who are unable to attend a formal service. Accordingly, this tradition represents the underlying constituent doctrine for these teens. However, for the most part, this history and doctrine are not overtly taught. Most teens learn about communion through observation and participation. Prayers, devotional talks, and hymns contribute to their understandings. However, rarely have the teens involved in this study previously articulated their perspectives.

⁶ As the title of this current essay (*The Eucharist in an Unarticulated World*) indicates, Smith's term "inarticulate" is assumed. The meta-analysis of the project calls this assumption into question. The very nature of heteroglossia challenges the possibility of Smith's assumption and highlights the irony of using terms like "inarticulate" and "unarticulate".

The researchers followed a simple interview protocol.

Beginning

- *Note their age and gender. Thank them for agreeing to participate in this project and assure them that their responses will be confidential.*
- *"May I have permission to record this interview?"*
- *What is your first name?*
- *How long ago was it when you were baptized?*

Ask and record the following:

- *Reflect for me about your experiences taking communion.*
- *If their answer is short, ask the following prompts:*
 - *Tell me about your first experience participating in communion.*
 - *Tell me about what your most recent experience participating in communion.*
 - *[Researchers sometimes followed a particular thread in a conversation they deemed germane to the larger project.]*

Thank them for their help with this project.

Churches of Christ have a deep commitment to a weekly observance of the ordinance.⁷ Ferguson begins the discussion of the Lord's Supper in a subsection entitled "Activities of the Assembly," located in chapter 4, "The Church and Her High Priest: Worship and Assembly."⁸ Ferguson is indebted to Scripture as his primary source for authority. He describes the Lord's Supper as the central act of the weekly assemblies of the early church that occurred on the first day of the week. "The Lord's Supper is expressive of the central realities of the Christian faith and of what the church is about" (250). He subsequently describes the Lord's Supper under the headings of biblical words and descriptors.

⁷ The following articulation of the Eucharist is summarized from FERGUSON, 1996, pp. 250-257. FERGUSON is a renowned church historian and professor emeritus of Abilene Christian University. Accessing the storied world of the earliest backgrounds of Christianity see FERGUSON, 1990, 1990). The following summary of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper believed by Churches of Christ was "member checked" and edited by Dr. Douglas Foster, professor of Church History at Abilene Christian University and co-editor of the *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, and by Dr. Ferguson. I do not propose Ferguson's understanding to be the official language of the Eucharist in Churches of Christ but more representational. The diversity of voices resists any homogenized vocabulary and grammar.

⁸ Ferguson, when giving feedback about my summary of his work states, "You capitalize Supper, but I follow the NRSV in leaving it lower case. That immediately expresses a different understanding. Lord's supper is not only the term I used most but also the term most used in churches of Christ." Note that he also does not capitalize "churches" when referring to Churches of Christ seeing the former as a description rather than a name. Private communication, February 25, 2012.

1. *Thanksgiving or eucharist* is the term used to express thanksgiving for salvation the congregation uses to address God.
2. *Lord's Supper* describes the meal Jesus hosts in his honor. The giving of the bread and wine is a symbol of the gift of salvation. Jesus gives the meal on behalf of the people. Lord's Supper is the most common expression used by Ferguson.
3. *Communion or koinonia* points to the sharing congregants have in Christ's sacrifice and its benefits. Participants are identifying with his life and death. Bread and wine are tokens of Jesus' pledge of continual fellowship with his people. The breaking of the bread signifies the sharing of the meal together indicating the congregation's unity and mutual sharing.
4. *Memorial or anamnesis* indicates a commemoration. Remembrance brings to mind the Passover Feast's function in the minds of Jewish celebrants. The remembrance is greater than mere recalling of past events but locates by faith each person who celebrates in the act as a participant in the ongoing event. "Thus, instead of simply calling the past to mind, the past was brought into the present and its benefits made operative" (p. 252). The memorial is thus a re-enactment or "the action portrayed and shared in the reality being enacted. In the same way, Jesus' actions at the Last Supper enacted the giving of himself soon to occur" (p. 253). In other words, "By repeating the actions of Jesus in breaking the bread and distributing the cup, believers participate in what he did; by the symbolism, they bring those past events into the present and make them living reality" (p. 253). Additionally, the memorial functions by anticipating the messianic banquet by proclaiming a future event. Proleptically, the memorial brings the future event into the present through joyful expectation.
5. *Covenant Meal* connects the Lord's Supper with the new covenant that is based on the forgiveness of sins. The Lord's Supper is an act of renewing one's covenant allegiance to the lordship of Jesus.
6. *Sacrifice* is seen through the congregation's prayers and thanksgivings as acceptable "thank offerings." The Lord's Supper reminds believers of the realities of the resurrection as a promise of the power of a sacrificial life. The church shares in the benefits of Christ's sacrifice, but also offers its own self-sacrifice to God.
7. *Sacrament or mystery* indicating the mediation of God's presence in the lives of believers. These concepts are often associated with the Lord's Supper in other traditions but Ferguson considers them as loosely tied to the event in the Bible. In broad ways, the words do connect with what is happening but Ferguson is reticent to incorporate a mystical experience in the proceedings.

Finally, Ferguson lists four attitudes or spiritual exercises that believers practice during their engagement with the Lord's Supper. Primarily, these

exercises relate to mental processes that lead to communal actions. The attitudes are self-examination, confession, reconciliation, rededication, and joy.

Ferguson too comes from a dialogic place in his understanding of the Lord's Supper. To contextualize Ferguson as a representative articulation of the Eucharist within Churches of Christ, I "cross-checked" his understanding with the entry "Lord's Supper" in the *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*. (BLOWERS and LAMBERT, 2004, pp.489-496). The essay substantiated Ferguson's understanding while also supplementing it with details of the historical development of the doctrine within the larger tradition from which Churches of Christ emerged. The authors highlighted the emphasis on "every first day of the week" and the centrality of the event. Developmentally, they spoke of a consensus that centered on the centrality of both preaching and the Lord's Supper, unfermented juice, multiple cups, communion meditations, and open communion. While practices may vary from place to place, the social location of the participants in my ethnographic research all adhere to these activities. However, the entry also detailed the lack of consensus about how people understand the Lord's Supper. While early pioneers of the movement emphasized the memorial or "emblematic" nature of the Supper, a more sacramental or mystical understanding was also present among some leaders.

Ferguson represents this tension by acknowledging the function of *anamnesis* in detail, but also by his reticence to use the terminology of *sacrament* or *mystery*. Ferguson notes how Christians celebrate the presence of Christ as the celebrant and host of the meal, but avoids using mystical language. Ferguson elaborated on his understanding of what Churches of Christ believe about the Lord's Supper by noting that memorial has been the predominant view in most churches and he emphasized *anamnesis* and other aspects in order to "broaden the perspective."⁹ A predominate view of memorial, but not as *anamnesis*, indicates a wholly rational approach to the event. Ferguson desires to broaden the perspective because of his personal convictions. He states, "As to my personal view, I believe that the eating of the bread and drinking the cup is the occasion when Christ and the Spirit impart spiritual nourishment to the

⁹ Ferguson, private communication, February 25, 2012. Doug Foster emphasized the difference between a rational understanding of memorial versus a more nuanced or sacramental view by stating that Ferguson's explanation of memorial by using the word *anamnesis* is an "ideal" statement of remembrance that would not be present in the understanding of many people in the pews of Churches of Christ." Doug Foster, private communication, February 26, 2012.

believer, somewhat comparable to the way baptism is the appointed time when God acts to forgive sins.”¹⁰

Finally, Hicks, professor of theology at Lipscomb University critiques what he perceives to be the traditional practices within Churches of Christ. He writes, “The contemporary practice of the supper has lost its table environment. The altar has replaced the table. The atmosphere has shifted from celebrative, interactive joy at a table to silent, private meditation at the altar. The contemplative sorrow of the cross has replaced the joy of the resurrection.” (HICKS, 2002, p. 129). Hicks intent is to reform practice in order to restore a robust table theology.

DATA ANALYSIS

THREE ANALYTICAL FRAMES: THEMES, SLIPPAGE, AND SILENCES

Analyzing data through a Bahktinan lens involves listening to the several voices in the conversation. Some of those voices come from the people who are directly participating in the research. Other voices come from outside including tradition, literature, and people who are indirectly related to the research. Finally, the researchers’ voices are ever present. Sometimes the voices sync; at other times, discordant. One way to organize the convergence and divergence of the voices is to listen to the areas of significant overlap as themes or patterns, the areas of disagreement as slippage, and the voices not heard as silences.

The principle of convergence suggests that when things fit together they will lead to a classification system for the data. What begins to emerge is a ‘manageable and accessible package’ in which emergent themes move to the forefront. Such themes can be judged by two criteria: Internal Homogeneity (the extent to which the data that belong in a certain category hold together); External Heterogeneity (the extent to which differences among categories are distinct and clear. (MILLER-MCLEMORE and MYERS, 1989, p.18).

The greater degree of convergence attained through the triangulation of multiple data sources, methods, investigators, or theories, the greater the confidence in the observed findings. Similarly, if you find disconfirming evidence or slippage, then you will need to openly describe and interpret the divergent paths the data suggests.

¹⁰ Ferguson, private communication, February 25, 2012.

Van Manen offers three approaches for identifying themes, which he describes as “the structures of experience.” (1990, p. 79).¹¹ (1) Find the phrase that communicates the fundamental meaning of the text as a whole. (2) Select the statements that are particularly essential and revealing about the phenomenon being described. (3) Examine every sentence’s contribution to the phenomenon being described. (pp. 92-93). The identified themes need to remain true to the essential quality of the experience described. If the phenomenon would change by deleting a theme from the experience, then we know that such a theme is essential to the meaning of the phenomenon described. Van Manen also lists four aspects by which people experience the world, namely, spatiality, corporeality, temporality, and relationality. (p. 101). These four aspects together form a unity of experience and might prove useful when assessing the data. Van Manen emphasizes how the central meaning of something is often multi-layered and multi-dimensional, which invites continued reflective analysis of the structural and thematic aspects of experience. (p. 78). Therefore, thick description is employed as a point of entry into the layers of meaning that are present within the narratives.

Finally, pattern analysis seeks to avoid the common pitfalls of seeking precise measurements to determine definitions and “linguistic arbitrariness.” (SCRIVEN, 1988, p. 136). Therefore, definitions are loosely delineated and are not intended to replace complex concepts. Consequently, interpretation involves analogies, paradigmatic examples of what the concepts are and are not, and plausible generalizations from particular instances employed in the analysis. The distillation of themes always falls short of the goal and is at best a simplification or a reduction of the deeper meanings embedded in the texts.

Slippage asks, “What is not congruent in the data?” “What is contradictory in nature?” Slippage seeks disconfirmation of findings. The search for rival explanations involves looking for other ways of organizing the data that might lead to different findings. It is a matter of considering the weight of evidence and looking for the best fit between data and analysis. It is important to report whatever alternative explanations are considered and tested during data analysis. Considering the instances and cases that do not fit the pattern increases understanding of qualitative patterns. These are the “exceptions that prove the rule,” or for evaluation purposes, cases that elucidate the findings.

¹¹ See also pp. 87–88 where he gives a detailed definition of theme from a phenomenological perspective.

Examples that do not fit help clarify the limits and meaning of the primary patterns.

Intertextual methods within discourse communities also allow for the analysis of slippage by looking for internal coherence, patterns, contrasts, and intersections. The significance of a speaker's slippages is a subject for later interpretation. A secondary analysis could also be conducted by asking the interviewee to verify the researcher's interpretations. Van Manen uses slippage as a springboard into a second interview.(VAN MANEN, 1990, p. 114). He encourages continued conversations and interviews until the participants are satisfied with the analysis of their perspectives.

The question that silence asks is "What is left unsaid that needs to be examined?" Van Manen states that nothing is more silent than that which is taken for granted or self-evident. (pp. 112-114). He notes how silences fall into different categories. People just do not speak about something for various reasons. Sometimes silence is part of who we are. Some silences are epistemological. These unspeakable silences are the beginning of interpretation. Epistemological silences may occur because of the linguistic ability of the speaker, the form of the discourse, or the setting and timing of the discourse. Others may be able to give voice to these silences. Maybe, at another time and place, the participant can also give voice to these silences.

Omissions are also silences. The gaps in the story may prove to be the most significant aspect of the narrative. Other silences occur when only one side of an argument is being told or a narrative is being reinterpreted in such a way as to silence other voices. Bringing the data into conversation with other data sets helps fill in the gaps.

Olson describes silences as what occurs when people tell "cover stories."(OLSON, 1995, p. 128). A cover story is one that people believe will be acceptable to society. Folk will often silence the stories they believe will be unacceptable even when they are deemed more "real" or authentic to experience. They discount what experience teaches and tell the cover stories instead. In the new world of social networking, people use avatars, second world, and plastic identities. However, virtual identities only highlight what has been true in human societies for millennia. People often create public personas that hide their private selves. There is a plethora of reasons, some honorable

and others not. These plastic identities contribute to the silences in people's stories.

Finally, coding data introduces silences in the research. This is an inherent limitation to all coding methods (even when software is used).¹² By imposing a particular way of seeing the data and categorizing the themes, the researcher frames the data in a particular way.¹³ It becomes difficult to see the data outside the frame. By utilizing one framing lens, an imposed and powerful conceptual grid that is difficult to escape squeezes the data into a mold. The grid is necessary to organize the data, but it also deflects attention away from uncategorized words and actions that become silences in the analysis. Therefore, secondary analysis of the data that looks for uncategorized activities and themes is needed. Ways to approach the secondary analysis include examining the literature for a different theoretical perspective, seeking counsel from another researcher or advisor, and re-examining the data for large sections that have minimal codes applied.

THE SETTING

The observations of the liturgy during the time frame of the study were determined to be typical of the standard practices of churches represented by their experiences. Services within Churches of Christ where the research occurred reflect a quiet, formal, and staid atmosphere. Individual prayers are spoken before the passing of the bread and the fruit of the vine. Men (and in one location, women) pass trays of unleavened bread to the members as they remain seated in the pews. Similarly, individual cups of grape juice are distributed. One researcher commented,

“It is eerily quiet during the passing of the emblems. I feel the song before communion (When I Survey the Wondrous Cross) sets the tone for what is to come and the song, while lyrically beautiful is very somber (the song's footnote indicates it was originally a Gregorian chant). The opening lyric and title seem to give the purpose of communion as to observe or contemplate the event of the cross. No mention is made of resurrection in its verses. This week, the purpose of communion was communicated as a time of grieving for the sacrifice of Christ.”

¹² PATTON, 1987, p. 57, warns, “...making sense of multiple interview transcripts and pages of filed notes cannot be reduced to a formula or even a standard series of steps.”

¹³ The oft-quoted phrase, “a way of seeing is always a way of not seeing” is an axiom from BURKE, 1935, p. 49.

The churches in this study included a short devotional thought and Scripture reading prior to the prayers intended to frame the activity of the communion service around common themes (confession, gratitude, remembrance, etc.). These suggested responses seem to be ignored and the focus uniformly is penitence, sorrow, and reflection on the cross (as noted in the interviews below). The somber preparatory song, silence of the room, and reading of Scripture contribute, at least in part, to the tone of the service and the manner in which the teens participated. One researcher reflected, “I have come to expect the communion reading and devotional thought to typically revolve around the crucifixion, the sacrifice of Christ, the resurrection, or instructions on taking communion.”

Throughout the project, observations of the teens revealed a consistent pattern. Most of them sat completely still with blank faces and a neutral yet stiff posture. Some will play on their phones, talk to the neighbors, write notes, and fidget nervously. Observation alone cannot reveal what this latter group is thinking; yet they seem disinterested and bored. They do not realize what they are communicating to others, but it is possible that the time of communion is routine and missing significance.

EMERGING THEMES

The themes that emerged in the study are easily described using Ferguson’s categories (described above). Additionally, there were conversations about the pre-communion activities that included music, Scripture, and devotional talks. The theme of the Eucharist being a covenant was not noted unless you include the idea of recommitment or rededication. The theme of sacrifice was evident, but it more naturally correlated with the idea of memorial. People described reflecting or remembering the sacrifice in terms of their recalling Jesus’ death on the cross. Of the four attitudes Ferguson suggest being present, only three were observed (minus reconciliation). While it was assumed the teens would reflect either a dearth or a cacophony of ideas, the teens readily articulated a coherent and surprisingly uniformed set of perspectives. Summaries and examples of the themes are:

Community

The student researchers gave more meta-analysis about community than any other theme. It indicates their personal research agenda and biases about the nature of communion. Churches of Christ are often critiqued as having an

individualistic practice that encourages participants to privately reflect in their seat. The “body” imagery is seen as Jesus’ body on the cross more than Jesus’ body the church. “Communion” as a term reflects praying and reflecting with God more than participation with the family around a table. The 1 Corinthians 14 admonition to “do all things in decency and in order” is interpreted as, “don’t do anything that will interfere or distract my thoughts.” The researcher’s interest in highlighting the theme of community indicates their own critique of current practices.

One researcher summarized his data by saying,

“When asked to reflect on the theme of ‘community’ in relation to Communion, every response began with a prolonged silence and ended with a statement that this theme played no role in their experience of communion. A few subjects attempted to generate answers based on this idea as a possible aspect of the Eucharist, but only after admitting that they had not previously considered it. Based on the responses in my interviews, the dimension of community is effectively absent from our conceptualization and practice of the Lord’s Supper.”

Yet the other researchers heard the participants speak about community in rich ways. For example:

“It seems like an oxymoron that it is called ‘communion’ but nobody talks to or acknowledges each other. It doesn’t make sense.” “And we are all his body.” “While taking it I try to be an example to others around me.” “When we take communion down front it is doing it together as a community. I get to see other people. I remember seeing this other guy [retells a story].” “It is a community thing.” “Communion is a great symbol for the church. It is something we are doing as a whole.” “When I serve communion, it lets me see others I know. Therefore, we cannot take it for granted.”

“Last week I helped serve communion. I got to see more people. I saw one guy-- he is a few years older and has had a hard life--sitting next to the man who has helped him get through it all. I was so encouraged remembering their story.”

One teen spoke at length about sharing the tray of bread and wine with the person sitting next to her. She said, “I don’t know, I’m kinda weird.” The researcher described the conversation as follows:

“I asked her why she thought it was weird or why she thinks other would find it weird. She says that others don’t do that so she is kind unique in the practice. She feels we make a connection with the person we are taking it with. ‘It’s not just me but there are others we are doing this with,’ she said. Upon reflection, she did it this way because she had always seen her parents do it that way so she just wanted to do it that way too. She concluded, ‘Others would think that is weird because they want to take it by themselves.’”

Memorial

Many subjects described their activity during communion simply as “reflecting” or “remembering.” The most common recollections pertained to Jesus’ death on the cross. Many communion tables have an inscription, “Do This In Remembrance.” The instruction during communion devotionals most often given is “remember.” As one teen stated, “The bread represents his body and the juice represents his blood. There’s really nothing more to it than that.” Similarly, another teen talked about two different thoughts based on the two emblems: the bread is for remembering his life and the juice is for remembering his blood being shed. She said, “When he said ‘this is my body’ this is for thinking about what he did during his life.”¹⁴

Other statements include: “Pass the trays and try to think of (force myself) about how agonizing of a death it was for us and why anyone would do that for their son for someone else who doesn’t deserve it.” “Think about body being broken, people spitting on him, didn’t retaliate but forgave them.” “Think about how much blood was spilt on the cross.” “Time to be reverent and you have to think that one man who didn’t deserve to die was brutally murdered--that deserves respect.” “I remember the first time. It felt good because I was finally participating by taking the symbols of Jesus body dying on the cross.” “I focus on the nails and the pain. I focus on the cross because that is why we take communion to remember the sacrifice.” “It is a weekly reminder of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.” “My Dad reads and taught me to read Mt 26 (or other Last Supper passages) during communion.”

One researcher noted how, “All of the teens talked about how their thoughts typically move to the cross event with one girl intentionally visualizing specific movie clips from *The Passion of the Christ*. She was specifically instructed to focus on that during the Lord’s Supper while at a youth retreat.”

Only one teen indicated that the memorial had more significance than mere reflection. She stated that communion is a “bringing the past into the present to remind us of our utter unworthiness.” The language of memorial resembles visiting a monument or grave more so than that of *anamnesis*. Participatory language (as seen in the discussion of sacrament below) represents one stream of the tradition as noted by Ferguson. The absence of

¹⁴ Memorial is the predominate theme in the findings and supports Hicks (2002) thesis.

Passover language concurs with this finding. Likewise, proleptic language is missing except for a few fringe references to “hope.”

Thanksgiving

Only two teens spoke about thanksgiving. One said, “The purpose of communion is to thank God for dying on the cross for our sins.” She notes that sometimes she just prays during communion thanking him for every way he is in her life. The other teen said, “Communion is a private moment where we thank God for all that he has done for you.” While the term “Eucharist” is not in the Church of Christ dictionary, the grammar of thanksgiving is common. The most often expression in the prayers is “let us give thanks.” Somehow, this prayer vocabulary has not prominently found expression in the teens studied.

Supper

Only one teen referred to communion as a meal. She made the comment while talking about a particular hymn that she found significant. She said that *Come take the bread, come drink the wine, come share the Lord* touches her partly because of the tune but she also likes the thought about coming to the table that God has prepared. Churches of Christ have often emphasized the nature of the meal, the symbol of the table, and Jesus’ role as a host. The absence of the language among the teens is surprising.¹⁵

Sacrament

One teen spoke about communion as an experience. She said, “It is emotional.” She explained by noting that communion “is bringing the past into the present, the sacrifice of Jesus into our lives. The bread is Jesus’ body and I imagine him on the cross. His death has brought me life. There is a reassurance that he is living in me, he is apart of me.” The mediation of God’s presence in a person’s life is represented here experientially, as one would experience the warm feelings in the heart. The “Real Presence” of Christ is not spoken in terms of consubstantiation or transubstantiation. The representational view of the sacraments as held by Churches of Christ is clearly evident in the theme of memorial above.

¹⁵ Although Hicks (2002) would not find the lack of table talk surprising but confirming of his thesis.

Self-examination

Self-examination routinely focused on sin. For some, this increased their guilt and shame. For others, they concentrated on forgiveness and hope. One teen said, “With that sacrifice comes hope. We have hope because of his death, but we come to God completely unworthy.” For many teens, self-examination led directly to rededication. For instance, “Communion is a time to reflect on these things and improve our lives and thoughts. Reminds me of God’s sacrifice of sending Jesus to the cross to pay for our sins. We still sin, but we are not considered sinners. We are saved but not perfect. It reminds us of this and what he has done for us. Communion brings me closer to God.” And another, “[It reminds me of my] sorrow and guilt--not trying to guilt trip myself, but I should hold [my life] to a higher standard or reverence. I remember that he doesn’t deserve the sacrifice and that my sins put Christ there.”

Confession and Reconciliation

A notable silence among the discourses related to the theme of reconciliation. While Scripture directly connects making amends between offended parties, the idea was not found in any of the teenagers’ vocabulary. Similarly, only one teen used the language of confession. The Lord’s Supper reminds him every week of his sin and his need to be forgiven. He feels he must ask for forgiveness before taking the Lord’s Supper. He said, “... and that this really is the point of it; to get to ask for forgiveness.” Yet, “sin” is a catchall term to describe the abstract. Concrete instances, such as broken relationships between friends, neighbors, nations, or God’s creation, are not uttered.

Rededication

Self-examination, confession, and rededication are closely tied together. One teen understood communion as “a call to improve our lives and thoughts.” Another stated that she employs the crucifix imagery as a weekly reminder of what God has done for her and of what she needs to do for God—“to live by God’s rules.” One teen described how she specifically makes connections between the emblems and her commitments. She thinks about “how he used his ‘body’ to do the things in his ministry and she thinks about how she can use her body to glorify him.” This ethical call was summarized well by a teen who said, “Communion is a quiet, reflective time when you are forced to focus on your faith and the Lord, Jesus. It is comforting to sit in quiet with everyone else, and it helps me listen to God. In the Lord’s Supper I hear God saying, ‘Pay attention!

Live by my rules!’ Every week, it’s a reminder of what the Lord did for me, and what I need to do for Him.”

OTHER NOTABLE PATTERNS

The previous section demonstrates a remarkable correspondence between the tradition of Churches of Christ and the teens’ current experience. Additionally, some patterns emerged that did not directly connect to Ferguson’s categories. These themes, however, do connect with the larger Christian story as told by Churches of Christ.

Taking Lord’s Supper Was Reason for Baptism

Three teens interviewed indicated that taking the Lord’s Supper was so forbidden as a child that they couldn’t wait to get baptized just so they could take it. One said, “I remember as a child, sneaking into the church kitchen after services and drinking all the leftover cups and eating crackers that I wasn’t allowed to touch.” The researcher critiqued this understanding saying,

“For a tradition that honors baptism as highly as we do, it should be especially alarming that kids are getting baptized for the wrong reason. When the Lord’s Supper is a motivator for baptism, something is askew. I believe open communion (or closed in the case of pre-baptized children) needs to be examined with fresh eyes. If the Last Supper was a fulfilled Passover or a covenant meal, children were not only participants in the meal but were key players. For example, they would ask the father what the significance of the meal was and then the father would tell the story to the entire family indicating how they too are participating in Passover with their ancestors. I believe we are impairing our children’s comprehension by not allowing them to participate in this feast of sharing and rejoicing.”

However, two teens indicated that delaying their participation in the Lord’s Supper increased their appreciation. The significance of the communion as a “special” time was directly connected to their anticipation for the day they could partake with the entire body. While adolescent in its conception, this theme demonstrates the struggle of coming to faith.

Never Received Formal Teaching about Communion

For most of the teens, there was not any formal instruction by the church but was more absorbed through the years and watching what other people do and what was said in communion devotionals. One teen noted, “nobody to her knowledge told me to think this way.” One teen talked about her dad’s instructions to read Matthew 26 during the communion time as a way to focus

her attention on the scenes of the cross. Communion meditations also functioned to provide some catechetical instructions. One teen talked about how a youth retreat utilized movie clips of *The Passion of the Christ*. The lack of catechetical instruction is alarming for such a pivotal event in the life of the church and one that the Church of Christ would classify as the central practice of the worship service. Hymns also play a role in shaping belief. Over time, the words to songs become a primary vehicle for doctrine (for good or ill). Some hymns are so common, their content is communicated far more often than other formal ways of teaching doctrine. One teen overtly described this by saying that she sings songs to herself during communion. She was able to name several right away. These help her discipline and focus her mind.

Reading Scripture is Cited as a Focus Aid

The researchers noted how teens stay up too late on Saturday night and come to worship sleepy. This coupled with the silence of the space and the absence of other focal points makes concentration elusive within the communion service. The teens indicated in their interviews that reading the Bible during communion helps them maintain focus. Some claimed reading the Last Supper account was their choice while others indicated Psalms or “anything” that wards off distraction. One researcher stated, “This is good to hear from the teens. However, in all of my observations, I never once observed a teen reading their Bibles, neither hardcopy or electronic. This tells me they know what could help but don’t follow through with it.” The slippage between interview and observation data indicates the telling of a “cover story.” Teens may say what is expected even though it does not correlate with their actions. When the data diverges, opportunities for further investigation emerge. The ability to tell a “cover story” itself indicates an awareness of a slippage with larger tradition.

Pre-Communion Readings Are Typically Ineffective

Communion meditations often become sermonettes. Many teens indicated that the readings and meditations are ineffective as they have either heard it all before or couldn’t understand how the passage was connected to communion. Such judgments are derived from their ability to differentiate between what is said publicly and their own understanding of the Eucharist. When the meditations were effective for the teens, they were dynamic and thought provoking. One teen said, “The man who talked before communion made a connection with me. The guy talked about overcoming obstacles when taking

communion. It gave me something profound to think about.” Yet, the researchers summarized their perspective as follows:

What I noticed about the pre-communion liturgy might demonstrate and reinforce the varying views of the Lord’s Supper among members and teens. Some songs were somber and sorrowful followed by a reading about joy. Another week has a reading focused on a faithful God who redeems his people. Another week has a song about the redeemed gathering at the throne of God in victory followed by a reading about confessing sin and removing guilt. These sentiments are all in line with traditional teachings but there is never more clarification made or attempts made at bringing varying meanings together. This makes it difficult for teens and children to learn what communion is all about and communicate those meanings. The result is hearing bits and pieces of aspects of the Lord’s Supper without having a solid grasp on any of it. It’s hard to articulate something you don’t have a firm grasp on.

Bakhtin, however, would assume that such heteroglossic realities are common if not unavoidable. Yet, through the diversity, everyone weaves together the fibers of others into their own tapestry of faith.

THEY ANSWERED WITH THEIR LIVES: AN ARTICULATION

The patterns identified above mostly concur with the themes found in the literature. Those themes did not emerge from a vacuum but from within a rich heritage and vibrant community. While the student researchers noted silences and slippages, the question as to the cause was not discerned. The researchers assumed the silences and slippages occurred due to the failure of the catechetical processes employed by the church. Their summaries of their individual projects indicate that they deem that the ethnographies confirm the teens’ understandings are anemic. They were inclined to look for “holes” and often failed to appreciate what was said.

For example, one student researcher failed to realize the significance of the dialogical process of coming to faith. His understanding of faith formation involves a mechanical understanding of education.

Our teens have been shown in studies to be inarticulate in their faith, a fact that is not their fault. As a church we have failed them as we have hindered the little children from coming to Jesus by placing our own rules and traditions in their way. Our lack of coherent instruction has produced individuals who can’t speak about their faith because it has not been spoken clearly to them. They have picked up on bits and pieces over the course of their lifetimes but don’t have the glue to put it all together and parents and ministers are not helping them. They also don’t have the language to speak about their faith. You only learn a new language by practice and hearing someone else speak it. As Christian adults, we don’t speak much about faith matters outside of Bible class. The language has been shown to

be for church and not for life so our children do not have adequate examples to model their own language after.

The researcher demonstrated the critical biases of a seminary student. He is not alone. If anything, the final papers of the student researchers represents what they were seeking, a more anemic understanding. In this way, even the data shows signs of being co-authored by the researcher's biases. The following conclusions drawn by the student researchers are representative of how the data and preconceptions co-authored their summaries. Two more examples will suffice:

The teens interviewed expressed thoughts that fit into several categories. They universally indicated that the purpose of communion was to remember the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, while one teen focused equally on a general time of thanksgiving for all that God has done. As far as the memorial is concerned, the teens all focused their thoughts on the *suffering* of the cross event, except for one teen who used the bread to focus on the life and ministry of Jesus and the juice to focus on the sacrifice. None of them were focused on the celebratory aspects and nature of communion as a fulfilled Passover or covenant meal nor did any of them mention "covenant" or "Passover" in their discussions, where the Lord's Supper finds its most complete meaning.

The unspoken difference between memorial and a more sacramental view pervades the pews. While an observer would notice little difference in the outward activities or practices of churches, the significance of the Supper's theological import as either memorial or sacrament is unarticulated. Subsequently, in the understandings of the teens, only the aspect of memorial has shaped their perspectives. Communion meditations may comment on these fundamental tenets of faith, but may unknowingly contradict one another from week to week. Nevertheless, most members, and especially teens, do not formally process these meditations as mediation between their acts and their accounts of their acts. Participation in communion seemingly is no different than visiting a monument or museum.

Alternatively, a meta-analysis of the research demonstrates how Bakhtin's dialogism explains the nature of these teens faith. While the student researchers wanted to find rationales for why these teens did not articulate a richer understanding, a more Bakhtinian perspective provides insights as to how these teens are expressing the faith commitments of their community. The teen's perspectives are products of the co-authoring that has occurred through liturgy, practice, and words. The teens did "answer with their lives" and the authoring process that gives teens a voice to articulate their engagement with the Eucharist in a particular historical and social location occurred. While their articulation may not be complete, whose is? Signs of "the process of becoming" are evident and hopeful.

My initial question, “How meaningful is the practice of communion for them?” was answered in varied and marvelous ways. While the student researchers need to increase their facility to listen, the chorus of voices of the teens indicates that they are able to articulate their faith.¹⁶ Silences and slippages did occur. Silences and slippages always occur in every discourse community (including seminarians, clergy, and theologians). But the title of this chapter is a misnomer. The storied life of these teens does not exist in an unarticulated world. It is the strength of the themes that did emerge that indicates the meaningfulness of their Eucharistic experiences. May their voices be heard even while they become more diverse and textured.

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¹⁶ When describing the research to various church leaders, they indicated their desire to hear what the teens were saying. The possibilities for an ongoing exchange, a continued co-authoring, between various discourse communities offers potential for intentional future and hopeful dialog.

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*Recebido em 18/02/ 2015
Aprovado em 15/04/2015*