

COMMUNION FOR THE DYING

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It was not until recently that, after 35 years of Christian ministry, I had my first experience of taking communion to a dying person. Does this say something about the way in which many Baptists regard communion? Significantly, it was not a member of my church who requested communion – but rather Jim from across the road, who belonged to a church currently without a minister.

When I arrived, I found relatives had gathered around the bedside. Although it was only two hours before that I had agreed to bring communion, people had just dropped what they were doing to be present. Clearly, for them, this was important.

I had brought along with me one of my deacons, who saw to the practicalities of ‘laying the table’, so all I had to do was to focus on Jim. He was very near the end and could scarcely utter a word. Nonetheless, as he lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling, it was clear that he could still hear. Without wasting time on general chit-chat, I went straight in to the communion ‘service’. After an opening prayer, in which we asked God’s help, I read to Jim the first seven verses of Rev 21, which speak of the new heaven and the new earth, where will be “no more death, no more grief or crying or pain”. On the basis of this Scripture, I spoke to Jim of the difference that Jesus makes to life and death, and of the glorious hope that is ours. Jim was a great Christian, so I was not in the business of presenting the Gospel to him, but rather reminding him of the truths he had long held. However, for the relatives listening in, it may have been another story. Holding his hand, we then prayed again, as I thanked God for these Gospel truths. From the ‘sacrament’ of the Word, we moved into the ‘sacrament’ of Communion – for both are ‘means of grace’. After reading the familiar words of institution, I led in prayer again, thanking God for Jesus and asking that he would strengthen our faith. Yes, the whole service was laced with prayer. I distributed bread and wine to all, reminding each one that ‘the body of Christ was broken for you’ and ‘the blood of Christ was shed for you’. One of the relatives helped me put the smallest of crumbs in Jim’s mouth, followed by a little wine. Yet again we prayed – this time we prayed in particular for Jim as he walked the final steps along the valley of the shadow. We concluded by holding hands with Jim and with one another as we prayed for one another in the words of the Grace.

Tears flowed down Jim’s cheeks – and down the cheeks of others: it was an immensely moving experience. It was also an immensely uplifting experience. As a result I hope that when I die there will be somebody to bring me communion too.