

## **PRAYING AT THE LORD'S TABLE**

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The other day a friend of mine sent me an e-mail: "I hated the way in which Baptist deacons used to 'murder' the great prayer of thanksgiving. Thank God, I'm now worshipping in an Anglican church".

I know what my friend means. In an Anglican church, as indeed in all the great liturgical churches, the prayer of thanksgiving at the Lord's Table is taken by an ordained minister. By contrast in most Baptist churches, that is precisely the one prayer which the minister may not lead. Instead, in order to emphasise our understanding of the priesthood of all believers as also to make clear that nothing 'special' (e.g. trans-substantiation) is happening to the bread and wine, we ensure that a lay person, normally a deacon, prays at this point. And the result can be exceedingly mixed.

I readily confess that many times I have been blessed by a deacon leading me in prayer at the Lord's Table. And yet, there have been times, when I have been exceedingly embarrassed. I am, for instance, always amazed how often people in their prayers confuse the persons of the Trinity: time and again I have heard people thanking the Father for dying for us on the Cross.

But it is not just the strange theology which I find difficult. It is also the way in which the prayer of thanksgiving can sometimes be anything but a prayer of thanksgiving. Some deacons lead the congregation in a prayer of confession – forgetting that we have already confessed our sins at the beginning of the service. Others, will use the prayer as an opportunity to reflect on the sermon or to bring before God the needs of the world. But the prayer of thanksgiving is a prayer of thanksgiving. As Jesus gave thanks, so we also give thanks. What's more, if Jesus modelled the length of his prayer of thanksgiving on the length of a Passover prayer of thanksgiving, then his prayer wouldn't have been half as wordy as those of some deacons.

How then can we ensure that the prayer of thanksgiving is led aright? I don't believe the answer is for the minister to take charge of this prayer (although I do appreciate the occasional opportunity to lead God's people in a prayer of thanksgiving, say, at the Christmas Eve Communion Service). I believe that ministers have a responsibility to discuss with their deacons the nature of the prayer – and to do so perhaps annually. Deacons, for their part, have a responsibility to prepare themselves properly to lead the congregation in this most special of prayers – and, if necessary, read their prayer rather than committing elementary theological gaffes.

I'm not convinced that the way Anglicans celebrate the Lord's Supper is any better than the way we do it. Indeed, no doubt in part because of custom and culture, I much prefer the way we Baptists do it – provided we don't murder the prayer of thanksgiving!

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