

Holy Communion without Bread and Wine

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The use of bread and wine in Holy Communion has been a tradition for more than twenty centuries and is accepted as a common practice among churches. Bread and wine are basically the primary food for Middle Eastern and European people. However, Indonesian people's staple food is rice. This is the main reason why local churches in Indonesia replace bread and wine with their local cuisines. Gereja Kristen Indonesia Dagen-Palur in Central Java uses turmeric rice and syrup for Holy Communion.¹ Many young clergymen in Timor also experiment by replacing bread and wine with *ketupat* (Indonesian traditional food; rice cake) and mineral water.

In October 2016, one of the assemblies of the Evangelical Church of West Timor (Gereja Masehi Injili di Timor or GMTI) on Rote Island, the southernmost island in Indonesia, conducted Holy Communion in a unique way. In the Communion, bread and wine were replaced with local cuisine. The participants were also allowed to eat and drink more than once. A majority of the congregation participated in that celebration. The pastor shared the story of this worship service, accompanied by photos, when we rode a speedboat from Kupang to Rote. This article is a critical-contextual study of this practice from the perspective of Jewish-Christian Easter celebrations in the scriptures.

There were about eighty members of the congregation at this service. Seating was arranged based on kinship. Each group sat around one table, and all participants belonged to one of these groups. Some *haik* (traditional drinking cups made of palm tree leaves) were placed on each table. The participants were asked to bring their own *haik* from their own houses. Fresh *nira* (palm wine) was used to replace grape wine for Holy Communion, and was contained in a huge *haik*

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¹ Retno Dwi Hastuti, "Pemahaman warga Gereja Kristen Jawa lingkup klasis Yogyakarta Selatan tentang hakikat gereja dalam keterlibatannya pada kegiatan sosial" (PhD dissertation, Satya Wacana Christian University, 2017).

hung near the rostrum at the main table where the pastor and church elders sit. The *haik* contains approximately five liters of fresh palm wine. According to the pastor, the congregation quickly finished the five liters of palm wine and the large *haik* was refilled three times. Worshippers did not drink only once.

This service of Holy Communion did not use bread, but *daun kelor* stew, made from the seed pods of the *marungga* (drumstick tree). The organizer prepared a huge amount of the pods so that the guests could eat them along with *sambal* (hot sauce made from chili peppers). One can imagine how merry the sacred celebration of Holy Communion was. This model of celebration has been used since May 2016. The elder provided an explanation to the congregation: “We know that bread and wine in Holy Communion serve as symbols that represent Jesus Christ’s flesh and blood. Bread is a symbol of Europe. For us, the symbols may be replaced with local foods we have here, but there is one thing that we cannot replace: our faith in Jesus as God. If any of the congregation is opposed to this replacement of symbols, they are not required to join the Holy Communion.”

Surprisingly, most of the members came, and they ate all the food and drank all the wine that was provided. After the celebration, the people who attended the communion told their neighbors who did not come, “It’s your loss. We felt deep brotherhood and celebration in today’s worship.” I listened to the pastor’s story in awe and happiness while flipping through the photographs. This could be a model of celebrating Holy Communion based on the daily tradition of the Rote people. “It is amazing!” I said to the pastor. “Next year, if you are going to hold such a celebration, I would like to come and experience it first-hand.”

One of my colleagues who also heard the story asked, “Pastor, can people celebrate the Holy Communion by replacing bread and wine with palm wine?” Spontaneously, I replied, “Why not? Bread and wine are the staple foods for Palestinians and Europeans. We are not Palestinian or European. We can use any kind of staple food to represent Jesus Christ’s flesh and blood. Is that wrong?”

“I know,” he responded. “But how could they eat and drink two or three times? Isn’t that wrong?” I answered casually, “What do you mean by ‘wrong’? The Holy Communion we celebrate originates from Jewish Christians’ Easter celebrations that are described in scripture. Passover is actually dinner among families. How can we have dinner with just one centimeter of bread? We need more bread, enough for

people to eat two or three times. They also can refill their drink two or three times. That is what we call dinner. Furthermore, when the church developed this custom, she changed it to formal liturgy. In the liturgy, communion involves a very small piece of bread and one sip of wine for each person. But if there is another creative model of liturgy, where people could still have familiarity and fraternity while maintaining order, what's wrong with lengthening the celebration around Jesus Christ?"

After hearing my answer, my colleague said nothing. I was not sure whether he agreed or disagreed with what I said about contextualizing the theology and practice of communion. Let me explain further.

In order to contextualize theology, Robert Schreiter suggested two important methods. First: open the church tradition. This is useful to improve the local church's understanding of tradition. Often times, missionaries have planted new churches that are very much like their original church. Subsequently, these patterns and practices related to overall domination and conquest are seen as unchangeable. Church tradition is used to legitimize this view.² The use of bread and wine in the sacrament of Holy Communion is an expression of cultural domination and conquest. If one carefully examines church tradition, and particularly scripture, it becomes clear that the customary use of bread and wine is part of a shallow understanding of the Passover Seder.

The Holy Communion commanded by Jesus and instituted at the Last Supper originated from the Jewish Passover Seder that celebrates the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. The main characteristic of this ritual is a family dinner. Exodus 12 portrays the dinner as bountiful, with the guests eating more than one serving since nothing was to remain. They even needed to consume all the roasted lamb. Any lamb left over in the morning had to be totally burned. We can conclude that a piece of bread and a sip of wine that becomes the ritual in Holy Communion today is an effort to do a liturgy based on this Passover Seder. But in its original celebration, Jesus allowed the guests to eat and drink the prepared bounty of food and drink.

Luke 22:17 says that Jesus "took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves." This takes place after Jesus sat down and ate with his apostles (22:14). The word

² Robert J. Schreiter, *Rancang Bangun Teologi Lokal* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1991), 53–54.

“eat” in verse 14 refers to a first course of bitter soup, green stew, and some kind of gravy. This course was concluded by the first cup in the Passover Seder, mentioned in verse 17. In verse 20, Luke identifies one more cup, shared after the meal. The word “eat” in verse 16 refers to the main dish, the roasted lamb served with unleavened bread, bitter soup, fruit sauce, and wine. That is, according to Luke, there were two cups distributed in the Last Supper celebrated by Jesus and his apostles.³

In the Holy Communion conducted by the congregation of GMIT Rote, they replaced the bread with *daun kelor* stew. The important question arises: does this not spoil the meaning of the sacrament? The second method in contextual theology, according to Schreiter, involves distinguishing particular practices from the configuration of main values, significance, needs, and interests of a culture. This method increases understanding of the culture as a whole, with all its complexities. Then it is possible to decide to what extent Jesus Christ must be brought into the culture, and to what extent he is already there.⁴ Romanticizing a culture is a real threat: an exaggerated admiration of the beauty and importance of cultural values can overlook ways in which a particular culture has little sensitivity to the role of sin within that culture. In theology, the combination of cultural romanticism with a lack understanding of church tradition can result in the lack of awareness of cultural elements that conflict with the church’s core values.

Masao Takenaka stated that the staple food for Asians is rice.⁵ Before the era of rice, the people of Rote Island ate papaya leaves along with sugar made of fresh palm wine (*tuak*).⁶ In the Jewish Passover Seder, the main food is lamb. One would expect, therefore, that Jesus would have distributed lamb to his apostles on Passover. However, in the accounts of the Last Supper, Jesus shared the bread.

After conducting in-depth research regarding this account, H. Ridderbos and H. Baarlink asked: “Why did Jesus not take the lamb meat? Rather, He took bread and wine.”⁷ Their answers are in-

³ H. Ridderbos and H. Baarlink, *Pemberitaan Yesus Menurut Injil-Injil Sinoptis* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1975), 184; author’s translation.

⁴ Schreiter, *Rancang Bangun Teologi Lokal*, 47–48.

⁵ Masao Takenaka, *Nasi dan Allah* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1993), 19.

⁶ Ebenhaizer I Nuban Timo, *Rote Punya Cerita* (Salatiga: Satya Wacana University Press, 2014).

⁷ Ridderbos and Baarlink, *Pemberitaan*, 185.

teresting. First, Holy Communion, like the Passover Seder, is a sacrificial meal, based on the sacrificed victim.⁸ Second, the celebration of Holy Communion is a warning as well as an act of hope, which is the main reason it needs to be celebrated. In the celebration, we are warned not to focus on the bread and wine as such. Rather, they transcend the familiar in representing Jesus Christ's flesh and blood. Ridderbos and Baarlink explain:

When the first sentence is uttered, namely "this" [this bread], it seems like leading our imagination to think straight to the bread. However when the priest comes to the second sentence, "this is My flesh," we are no more allowed to stand straight as a ramrod on the word bread. We are persuaded to take a further step, namely to think of Christ. . . . In the future explanation, also by Lutheran theologians, it was stated that such an idea could no longer be maintained. Gollwitzer stated that in the Last Supper by Jesus' apostles, there was no question on what substance of meal given by Jesus to them, because they did not think of another food besides bread.⁹

Therefore, the most important aspect in Holy Communion is not the bread and wine as food and drink, but its representation of Jesus Christ's sacrificed flesh and blood. Any kind of meal—bread, *tumpang* (turmeric rice), *ketupat* (rice cake), *daun kelor* (drumstick leaves), wine, syrup, mineral water, palm wine)—can be and is appropriate to use, as long as people understand the elements as the representation of Jesus Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection. Ridderbos and Baarlink confirmed a similar notion. They stated, "What will be represented in Holy Communion is not the sacrifice itself; rather, it is the power of forgiveness and peace. Or in other words, what was actualized and represented is not the incident creating salvation (the victim's death) but the act to distribute and ensure the salvation."¹⁰

The grouped seating position surrounding a table based on kinship or clan is an element from the cultural context in Timor. This is not a fixed regulation, but comes from a situation where everyone belongs to a kinship group. The basic seating position for guests in

⁸ Ridderbos and Baarlink, *Pemberitaan*, 186.

⁹ Ridderboos and Baarlink, *Pemberitaan*, 188.

¹⁰ Ridderboos and Baarlink, *Pemberitaan*, 190.

Jewish parties is on the floor. This was also the seating position of the apostles and Jesus when they held their Passover Seder.¹¹ The use of a table where the guests sit on the side while the host sits on the end is a European form from the Middle Ages. The cross-shaped table for Holy Communion is a Christian imaginative adventure that is implemented in the tradition of eating together. Recently, at times guests eat and drink while standing in various groups while talking. The eating tradition for parties in the Timor region is somewhat different. The servers fill the plates with foods and distribute them to the guests, who sit in assigned seats. The servers will also serve drinks for the guests. This custom is not the essence of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Churches are given freedom to choose any formation they are comfortable with that fits the congregation. The church as the sacrament of God's Kingdom should be a community of faith that will experience unlimited diversity but still be based in monotheistic faith focusing on believers' mutual commitment to Jesus Christ as God. If this basis is ignored or omitted, the diversity turns into chaos. But ignoring diversity for the sake of uniform practice will only entrap the church in a particular cultural colonialism with a particular interpretation of the Bible. Forcing congregations into full compliance with colonialist practice at the classis and synod levels of governance not only curbs liturgical freedom, it also robs the congregation of its participation in the theological task of universal priesthood as defined by the sixteenth-century reformers.

¹¹ Albert Nolan, *Yesus Bukan Orang Kristen* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Kanisius, 2005), 76.