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The Doctrine of the Holy Communion

BY MICHAEL GREEN

THE Holy Communion Service of 1662 is primarily the work of one man, Thomas Cranmer. It is the work of a truly biblical theologian, in which the doctrinal insights brought about through the Reformation are given liturgical expression. It is a theological and literary masterpiece, perhaps the crowning glory of our liturgy, and it was achieved by one who, though an expert in patristics, was prepared when necessary, to go behind tradition to the Bible, as the norm both of belief and practice.

We, too, live in an age of liturgical reform, and like Cranmer, we live in a day when biblical theology has come into her own again. The next thirty years or so will show whether we have succeeded, as the sixteenth century Church succeeded, in making our liturgical reforms the vehicle of a biblical theology.

* * * *

Let us remind ourselves first of the eucharistic situation as Cranmer found it. All too often this sacred fellowship feast was a solitary act, mumbled through by ignorant Mass-priests, behind rood screens, and in Latin ; a service in which the laity took no part except to gape, and occasionally to receive the bread ; a service where Christ was said to be offered upon the altar for the sins of the living and the dead, where the elements were transformed into His physical presence, where the priest was the sacerdotal intermediary between men and God, whose function it was to sacrifice Christ anew. That is no exaggeration of the popular "Catholicism" current in England just over 400 years ago.

Cranmer revolutionized all that. He made this service once again a corporate act of worship ; indeed it was not to take place unless there were "four persons, or three at the least" to communicate with the priest. It became a service which all could understand and join in ; where no artificial barrier separated priest from people, but all gathered together round the Lord's board in the body of the church. No longer was there a muttered "*hoc est corpus meum*" away in the sanctuary—an abuse which brought a new word of opprobrium into the English language : *hocus-pocus*. But the manual acts were openly performed before the people, and the climax of the service was their communication in both kinds. Gone was any suggestion of offering Christ anew, gone the intercession to the saints, gone the idea of sacrificial priesthood ; the very word altar was removed from the service as liable to misunderstanding, and the title Minister used as an alternative for Priest.

A revolution indeed ! And Cranmer made no secret of the principles which underlay his work. They were all deeply scriptural ones.

(i) As Cranmer looked into the New Testament, he saw that the Holy Communion was essentially a sacrament of the Gospel, a dramatic enactment of the death of Christ for sinners, and the need of personal appropriation of that death by individuals. He saw that in the upper room Jesus pointed, in prophetic symbolism, to His sacrificial death for sin, so soon to be accomplished; a sacrifice sealed in His blood, establishing the new covenant between God and man. This work of reconciling man to God he saw to be complete and never to be repeated. It was the achievement of Christ alone, upon the Cross. To it sinful man made no contribution, and to it he can make no addition. "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3: 18). His sacrifice is once for all, *εφάραξ*, as the author of Hebrews loves to emphasize (Heb. 9: 28, 10: 10). This salvation which springs from the grace of God alone, and must be received by faith alone, lies at the heart alike of Reformation and of New Testament theology. It excludes any possibility of merit on our part. It excludes the possibility of contributing to that sacrifice. We are the sinners for whom Christ died, and in this Gospel sacrament the grace of God is offered to us in our worthlessness and sin. The movement in this service is from God to man; it is not the symbol primarily of our offering to God but of His offering to us. And it is this that is dramatized as we come with empty hands to take and eat.

(ii) And because it is a sacrament of the Gospel, Cranmer went to some pains to exclude any suggestion that our offerings contribute in any way to our salvation. We do not offer Christ, or unite our offerings with the offering of Christ. In the words of his own crucial distinction, "One kind of sacrifice there is which is called a propitiatory or merciful sacrifice, such as pacifieth God's wrath and indignation, and obtaineth mercy and forgiveness for all our sins. And although in the Old Testament there were certain sacrifices called by that name, yet in very deed there is but one such sacrifice whereby our sins be pardoned, which is the death of God's son, our Lord Jesus Christ; nor never was any other sacrifice propitiatory at any time, nor never shall be. This is the honour and glory of this our High Priest, in which He admitteth neither partner nor successor . . . Another kind of sacrifice there is, which doth not reconcile us to God, but is made of them which be reconciled by Christ . . . to show ourselves thankful to Him; and therefore they may be called sacrifices of laud, praise, and thanksgiving. The first kind of sacrifice Christ offered to God for us; the second kind we offer to God by Christ" (*The Lord's Supper*, p. 235). That is why he moved the prayer of oblation to its special place after the reception. If there is any sacrifice in the Holy Communion on our part, it must be only in the second sense of Cranmer's definition; it must be a responsive not a propitiatory one, in return for the grace of God in Christ by which we have been reached, not in union with His offering. That would be rank pelagianism. And as if to emphasize the point, the prayer of oblation now becomes optional. At the discretion of the Minister all mention of our sacrifice can be omitted. Cranmer has been much criticized for this breaking up of the old Canon of the Mass, but, as Dom Gregory Dix recognized, "his was not a disordered attempt at a Catholic rite, but the only effective attempt ever made to give

liturgical expression to the doctrine of justification by faith alone" (*The Shape of the Liturgy*, p. 672).

(iii) Thirdly, let us notice the prominence Cranmer gives to the communion itself. Just as grace must be met by faith, so the sacrament of the grace of God is incomplete without the believing reception by the people. That is why the climax of the medieval service, the adoration of the elevated host, is replaced in Cranmer's office by the act of communion itself. Cranmer believed that it was this eating and drinking that Jesus meant when He said, "Do this"—not consecration, as the schoolmen avowed, but the act of communion in remembrance of Him. Cranmer did not himself use the phrase "prayer of consecration"; that was added to the rubric in 1662. The words that were thought to effect the change from bread and wine to the Body and Blood of the Lord in the Latin rite were, of course, "This is My Body . . . This is My Blood." But as Cranmer pointed out, these are words of administration, not of consecration; spoken after He had taken and broken bread, taken and blessed the cup. They are spoken, moreover, not to the bread, but to the disciples, as he reiterates time and again. This explains why Cranmer intended us to move straight on to the reception after the recital of the events in the upper room; there was originally no Amen at the end of the prayer of consecration; the narrative of the Last Supper, the Communion, and the Lord's Prayer are a single complex at the centre of the service, to Cranmer's thinking. It is only in the eating and drinking that Christ's command, "Do this", is obeyed, and true communion enjoyed with Christ and other members of His family. This dynamic conception of the service is only now being fully appreciated; it is poles apart from the old static conception of the Mass where Christ was identified with the consecrated elements *tout simple*, thus allowing adoration and reservation, both of which are incompatible with Cranmer's service; and also giving rise to fruitless discussions as to whether mice ate the Body of the Lord when they consumed a piece of consecrated wafer, and to such follies as nuns in a burning convent rushing into the flames in order to rescue the Lord in the reserved sacrament.

(iv) Perhaps this is the point at which to emphasize that Cranmer took seriously the New Testament language about feeding on Christ in the Eucharist. These were no "bare signs" of our redemption, but potent means of communion with the living Lord. The bread that we break is, indeed, participation in the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 10: 16). The gift Cranmer knew to be real, but the presence of the Lord is spiritual. It is not annexed to the elements in any way other than by promise. The New Testament makes it plain that the Lord is spiritually present in His Church gathered for worship; He indwells the individual believer, too, by His Spirit; but there is no suggestion in the New Testament that He is in the bread and wine. Not "in" but "with" is the operative word. As we take and eat physically the bread and the wine, so we feed spiritually on Him by faith—but the wicked do not, for it is a spiritual feeding. He summarizes his position thus: "They say that Christ is corporally under or in the forms of the bread and wine; we say that Christ is not there, neither corporally nor

spiritually, but in them that worthily receive the bread and wine He is spiritually, and corporally in heaven. They say that Christ is received in the mouth, and entereth in with the bread and wine. We say that He is received in the heart and entereth in by faith" (*The Lord's Supper*, p. 98). With this Hooker agrees: "The real presence of Christ's most blessed body and blood is not to be sought for in the sacrament but in the recipient" (*Eccl. Polity*, V, lxvii). And this is the characteristic view of Anglican theology until 1835.

These were the principles that underlay Cranmer's drastic revision. Of course, he had some "blind spots". His doctrine of the Atonement was too much influenced by Anselm's satisfaction theory; he still thought in terms of the medieval treasury of merit, though attributing it to Christ and not to the saints and the Virgin; his service is deficient in *eucharist*, in praising God for the mighty work of redemption; the Holy Spirit plays little part; and the absence of an Old Testament lesson is regrettable. Nevertheless, we are able today better than ever before to appreciate the basic rightness of Cranmer's understanding of Scripture. Jeremias' book *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* is a landmark in modern studies of the subject. It shows how the background to the service is not the *Haburah* nor the quite illusory Passover *Kiddush*, but the Passover itself, whether or not, as some exegetes of John maintain, the Last Supper was an anticipated Passover, kept twenty-four hours early by Jesus and His disciples. Jeremias and others have gone a long way to elucidate the Jewish Passover procedure, which sheds such light on the Holy Communion. It is now widely recognized, for example, that an entire meal separated the breaking of the bread from the giving of the cup—a point which is bound to make future revisers ask themselves whether this ought not to be reflected in the service, by administering first the bread to all and then the cup, as in some non-conformist churches.

We know too that when the Lord *blessed*, it was not blessing the food, whatever that might mean, but blessing God for it, in accordance with persistent Jewish usage which sets things apart for the use of men by giving thanks for them to God the Giver. "Blessed art Thou, O Lord" runs the ancient grace, "King of the Universe, who bringeth forth bread from the earth" (*Berakoth*, 6. 1). This recognition, endorsed in the 1958 Lambeth Report, makes irrelevant the search for a "moment of consecration". In the West this has been thought to be effected by the power of Christ's words: "This is My Body, etc."—a view that is unconvincing because the words in question were used by Jesus when He was administering the elements over which He had already blessed God. And in the East the change from bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord were thought to be effected by the Holy Spirit—hence the *epiclesis*. But as Professor Moule points out in his recent book *Worship in the New Testament*, "the invocation of the Holy Spirit upon non-personal objects is alien to the New Testament doctrine both of the Spirit and of persons" (p. 42). Neither Eastern nor Western understanding of this so-called moment of consecration is primitive, and their removal should prove solid gain in ecumenical discussion.

Again, it is from the Passover that the threefold orientation of the

Communion derives. The Passover looked back to the deliverance from bondage and death in Egypt through the death of a lamb. The first Passover was a sacrifice which had expiatory effect and the wrath of God was turned away from Israel ; but succeeding Passovers were not sacrifices, and had no expiatory effect. They were memorials of that great deliverance ; and it is the same with the Holy Communion. It, too, has a backward look ; it is not a sacrifice, but it is the memorial of one. Moreover the Passover had a present significance. The original Passover was intended to strengthen the Israelites on their journey, and this element was prominent in the annual feast. Furthermore, the joint eating and drinking forged a close bond between the participants, the violation of which was a heinous crime. It is the same with the Eucharist. It, too, is a present feeding on the Body and Blood of Christ, and binds the participants into one loaf, one body (1 Cor. 10: 17) whose fellowship cannot be broken without the most heinous sin, and disastrous consequences (1 Cor. 11: 19, 27-29). At the Holy Communion we do indeed feed on the sacrificed Lamb of God, but that is not the same thing as making a sacrifice ; we share in the *benefits* of that sacrifice of Christ's upon the Cross, not in the *offering* of it.

There was also a forward look in the Passover, to the ultimate feast of salvation when Messiah would come and redeem Israel, according to the rabbis. (*Pirque R. Eliezer* 29 (14d) : " By the atoning force of this blood they were redeemed in Egypt, and they will be redeemed in the day of the Messiah ".) And this eschatological note is stressed in all the accounts in the New Testament, especially St. Luke. At the Communion we " show forth the Lord's death till He come ". Just as the Passover was the pledge of the Messiah's coming, so is the Eucharist the guarantee of His return. That is why the old Aramaic word *Maranatha* was used at the Communion. " O our Lord, come ! " (1 Cor. 16: 22—*Didache* 10: 6).

It appears, then, increasingly that Cranmer had a deeply biblical understanding of the Lord's Supper and its significance, and translated this understanding most effectively into the Liturgy that we have now. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that we in our generation seek to be as biblical as was Cranmer in any eucharistic revision we may contemplate.

* * * *

There are two burning questions in this field which are widely discussed these days, and we must give them some consideration. The first is " Who may celebrate the Holy Communion ? " and it involves the whole question of intercommunion. The second is " In what sense is the Eucharist a sacrifice ? " and it involves the whole question of offering and oblation.

In the New Testament it is never specified who should preside at the Lord's Supper. No doubt an Apostle would do so if he were present (Acts 20: 7) ; but if not, it would appear to be any responsible Christian to whom the task was committed by the congregation. So much so that Dr. Eduard Schweitzer, in his recent important book, *Church Order in the New Testament* (p. 187) concludes that *any* Church member may cele-

brate the Eucharist. He points out that when there are abuses over it at Corinth, there is no one responsible person with whom Paul can expostulate. If the reference in Acts 2: 46—"breaking bread from house to house"—refers to the Communion, as most scholars are inclined to think it does, then that settles the matter; for it is explicitly said that this is what the *converts* did. It was a lay celebration. In the Pastorals there is great concern over church order, but nowhere is it suggested that the celebration of the Holy Communion is a function either of the presbyter/bishops whom Timothy and Titus are to ordain, or of the apostolic delegates themselves. Admittedly Ignatius says it is not lawful to hold eucharist, baptize, have an agape, or do anything without the bishop (Smyrn. 8. 1; Philad. 7. 2; Trall. 2. 2). But quite apart from the fact that the very vehemence of Ignatius' appeals on this matter suggests that his view was far from taken for granted, there is the evidence of 1 Clement and Hermas (1 Clem. 42. 4; 44. 4, 5; 54. 2; 57. 1; Herm., *Vis.*, 2. 4; 3. 9) which show that at Rome, not to mention Corinth, church government was, as Streeter describes it in his *Primitive Church* (page 221) "of a type which might not inappropriately be called presbyterian". Indeed, his book shows that there was considerable variety in the church order of the primitive Church. Even as late as Justin Martyr in the mid second century the celebrant is simply called ὁ προεστῶς (*Apol.* 1. 65), the president. Streeter's conclusion, though it may be unwelcome to some, has not been repudiated. He says: "The greatest obstacle to reunion is the belief held by most bodies of Christians that there is some one form of Church Order which alone is primitive, and which, therefore, alone possesses the sanction of Apostolic precedent. Our review of the historical evidence has shown this belief to be an illusion. In the Primitive Church no one system of Church Order prevailed" (*op. cit.*, p. 262).

Of course the near universality with which we meet bishops in the second and third centuries makes it clear that they have a crucial role to play in any united church; but to commend episcopacy (as the Bishop of Woolwich puts it) "not as the source and symbol of unity but as a gimmick for validating sacraments—this is what neither Presbyterians nor Methodists, nor any other non-episcopal Church, will stand or ought to stand" (*On Being the Church in the World*, p. 105). For this reason we may well welcome the recent public letter of the thirty-two theologians to the Archbishops on this issue. No doubt there are valid reasons for great reserve over intercommunion in the present state of our scandalous divisions. Perhaps the strongest is that it would be an unreal papering over of very real cracks, a wrong condoning of the sin of schism which has first to be repented of. But let us not reject intercommunion upon the wrong grounds, as if episcopal ordination were needed to make valid the sacrament of communion between a company of redeemed sinners and their Lord.

The other matter of crying concern in recent years has been the question of eucharistic sacrifice, what the Church offers to God in this holy service. The issue has crystallized round the Offertory in particular. Instead of a simple placing on the table of the bread and wine by the priest as the rubric directs, there has been a widespread movement in recent years to revive the offertory procession. Now this in itself is

harmless enough. It might be welcomed by Evangelicals as bringing the laity into the service. Its precise meaning is obscure; to Irenæus it symbolized the offering of the fruits of the earth to God, to Hippolytus the offering of the Church, to Augustine the offering of ourselves. In modern times it is usually taken to mean the offering of the world and our workaday lives to God. But it is difficult to see that this is realistic symbolism. In the early church it meant something; the people gave generously and in kind, and it was indeed a sort of weekly harvest offering. But how can it become a costly and meaningful pledge of our dedication to God in this twentieth century to carry bread and wine which one has not even paid for, up the aisle on a Sunday morning? If we are to have this procession, let it at least mean something, as it does in Halton where one family each week is responsible for buying the bread at the bakers and the wine at the off-licence. But in the New Testament itself there is no suggestion that there was an offertory to God in the Holy Communion. Of course, there were gifts from the people of God to Him for His work, and some of them are called sacrifices in the New Testament, such as our prayers, our praises, our evangelism, and our almsgiving; supremely, the sacrifice of our self-surrender (1 Pet. 2: 5; Heb. 13: 15, 16; Phil. 2: 17; Rom. 12: 1; 15: 16). It may be a justifiable extension of biblical usage to apply the word sacrifice to the offering of the bread and wine in the Holy Communion, though, as if to warn us that this is dangerous ground, there is no hint of such language in the New Testament.

If we call this offering a sacrifice, we must be very clear what we are doing. Such sacrifices are, to quote Professor Moule again: "simply the human response of gratitude to God's initiative in giving Himself up in Christ on our behalf. It is God's act—God's self-offering in Christ—which alone has reconciled us to Him; the rest—whatever we can do—is all response" (*op. cit.* p. 41). This sense of "responsive sacrifice" is how the early fathers up to Cyprian used the word, alike for their offerings at the Eucharist and for their prayer, preaching, and holy living. All alike was offered to God; it was a *sacrificium*, but they never dared to suggest that their sacrifice was taken up into Christ's, or identified with the sacrifice Christ made upon the cross. This would have been to obscure the difference between the Saviour and the saved, and that is a distinction which carefully needs safeguarding in this anthropocentric age.

We need to remember that the Church is not simply the extension of the incarnation. For the Church is neither divine nor atoning. It is the object not the author of salvation. But the tendency today is to forget this, and, not content with coming empty-handed to receive from God, in this holy feast, churchmen are over-anxious to find something that they can offer to God. And because it is plain from Scripture that the only offering that is pleasing to God is the offering of His Son, there is a desire to join Christ in that offering—and you get such absurdities propounded as the whole Christ (that is, Christ and His Church) offering the whole Christ to God in the Eucharist. This view has gained force in recent years since Bishop F. C. N. Hicks' book *The Fullness of Sacrifice*, which contends that the Church is doing in the Eucharist on earth what Christ is doing at the altar in heaven, ever

offering the sacrifice once made, ever pleading before His Father the merits of the great priest-victim. The argument is based on the imagery of Hebrews, but there is a fatal flaw in it. As Moffatt, Buchanan-Gray, and others have shown, the symbolism of Hebrews is drawn not from the temple but from the tabernacle in the wilderness. And in the tabernacle there was no altar in the holy of holies—the counterpart of which is heaven itself (Heb. 9: 24. For this point, as for some others in this paper, I am indebted to a paper read by the Dean of Bristol at the Evangelical Fellowship of Theological Literature, in June, 1961.). Furthermore, the whole idea of the timelessness of Calvary and the constant offering of Christ in heaven is emphatically denied in this Epistle. The sacrifice of Christ is *ephapax*. It is as unrepeatable as death itself (Heb. 9: 28; 10: 11, 12). Christ is represented not as constantly offering at a heavenly altar His unique sacrifice, but sitting at the right hand of God in the place of honour and power, His work of redemption completed.

One might further ask what sort of a doctrine of God do we get if we hold to this continual pleading of Christ? Its effect is to drive a wedge between the Father and the Son in our redemption. Westcott's comment bears repetition: "The modern conception of Christ pleading in heaven His passion, offering His blood on behalf of men, has no foundation in this Epistle. His glorified humanity is the eternal pledge of the absolute efficacy of His accomplished work. He pleads by His very presence on the Father's throne" (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 230). And therefore the Church cannot do on earth—offer Christ—what Christ is not doing in heaven, and any identification or association of the responsive sacrifice of Christians in the Communion with the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ must be strongly resisted as fundamentally at variance with the New Testament. The early fathers never made that confusion, and it would be tragic if the truth, so clear in the Scriptures, in the writings of the first two centuries, and at the Reformation, were obscured in any future revision by careless language about the union of our sacrifice with Christ's. His sacrifice is the root of our redemption, and ours is the fruit of it. That is a distinction which *must* be kept clear. If we are to have a procession, let it be after the reception, when in response to the grace of Calvary of which we have partaken, we offer to our Lord our money and our gifts, our praise and ourselves. This alteration of the place of the offertory in the service may not be primitive, but I believe it would safeguard the uniqueness of our Lord's sacrifice for us, and make clear the responsive nature of our sacrifice to Him. This may prove to be an occasion where, like Cranmer, we have to discount tradition in order to be true to a scriptural principle which might otherwise be jeopardized. It ought to be seriously considered in any revision of our own. And then, I believe, the opposition of Evangelicals to the offertory procession would vanish.

It is sad that this service which the Lord Jesus gave us as the badge of unity should have proved down the ages to be the storm centre of division. It has not been possible in this paper to avoid some controversial issues, but I do not relish them. I want to end on a note which all the divided churches of God should be able to echo, that of fellowship. New Testament Eucharist was the supreme expression of

the joint participation in Christ which made the Church one loaf, one body. They ate their bread with exultation, in anticipation of the table fellowship in the future kingdom of God. They expressed this fellowship in a love feast to which all contributed, and which was most closely associated with the Eucharist. There was no watertight department separating sacramental rite from common fellowship.

Does that describe our fellowship and our communions today? The scattered worshippers appear for their weekly 8 o'clock, neither knowing nor wanting to know their neighbours, showing remarkably few signs of exultation about them, and enjoying no effective fellowship together either then or in the rest of the week. Is *this* the foretaste of the heavenly banquet? Yet without real deep fellowship, how can the Church be effective? The early Church achieved this through the *agape*; the Reformers by bringing the Holy Table down into the body of the church and gathering the family of the faithful round the table of the Lord. The worker-priests in France and the Halton experiments of Canon Southcott have done it by bringing the Eucharist into the context of the fellowship of the home. What are we to do in this twentieth century which seems to have lost the very idea of community? We must show in the Church a quality of fellowship the world cannot match. That is certain, if our Church is to survive and grow. It may be through house Communions, it may be through the friendship of the parish breakfast, it may be by making the Lord's Supper the central service of the Lord's Day—not the preliminary or appendage to Morning and Evening Prayer; but somehow it must be achieved. It is not until the depth of fellowship in the Church approximates to that unity which we profess when we break bread, that the world will see that Christians do love one another, and that we hold communion with the living Lord.
