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Extended Communion: One Parish's Experience A Response

ROGER BECKWITH

The article which appeared under the above title in the second issue of *Churchman* for this year was written by David Smethurst, then rector of Ulverston, Cumbria, but since appointed dean of Hong Kong. He had offered it both to *Churchman* and to Grove Books, and owing to some confusion in the counsels of the latter firm, which had assured *Churchman* that they had no present intention of using it, it appeared simultaneously both in this journal and as booklet no.96 in the Grove Worship series. However, its double appearance has had the effect not only of securing it a wider readership, probably, but also of drawing a response from two different points of view. In the Grove booklet, a response from Bp. Colin Buchanan was appended, written from the standpoint of one who accepts the author's assumptions, while the response that follows is written by one who questions them.

The assumptions are three: (i) that the ideal of having an administration of Holy Communion in every church each Sunday must have paramount importance; (ii) that, since the practice of the Church of England is to confine the celebration of Holy Communion to presbyters and bishops, the way to achieve this in a period when clergy are fewer than are needed is to have the consecrated elements carried by laymen straight from one church to another; (iii) that the form of service which one will use will be based on the *Alternative Service Book*, which, at least in its supplementary *Services for the Sick*, authorised subsequently, sanctions 'Communion by Extension'.

We will discuss these three assumptions in turn.

1. An Administration every Sunday?

It was certainly Cranmer's ideal (in common with Luther and Calvin on the continent, and in contradistinction from Zwingli) that there should be a celebration and administration of communion in every church each Sunday. This was why he provided for the Ante-Communion (the earlier, non-sacramental part of the Communion service) to be read as a reminder on any Sunday when, for lack of a sufficient number of communicants, which he judged to be 'four, or three at the least', this ideal could not be fulfilled. Since lay people had been accustomed, prior to the Reformation, to receiving

communion only once a year, it proved impossible to persuade them at once to increase their frequency of receiving to the point of once a week, and Cranmer had to be content to increase the rule to 'at the least three times in the year'. For two centuries after the Reformation, a quarterly or monthly celebration was the most that our parishes experienced, and it was only as a combined result of the Evangelical Revival and Oxford Movement that reception, and therefore celebrations, became more frequent.

If, for lack of clergy rather than lack of communicants, some of our churches had to return for a time to having communion less frequently than once a week, this would be a decline from Cranmer's ideal, but not a decline from the practice for which he settled. The Ante-Communion could be read, as he intended, after Morning or Evening Prayer on those Sundays when there could not be a celebration, to remind people of the ideal; and as clergy numbers increased again, a closer approach to the ideal would become possible.

Is there any reason why Cranmer ought not to have settled for the practice which he did? We are sometimes told that we *must* hold the Lord's service on the Lord's day. But are not prayer and the ministry of the Word, which Christ also commanded (Matt. 18:19; 28:20, etc.), likewise the Lord's service? We are also told that there is an example of a weekly celebration in the New Testament (Acts 20:7), and that it has been the normal practice of the church ever since to do the same. True though this is, no one is suggesting that it should cease to be the *normal* practice; and New Testament examples do not have exactly the same force as New Testament commands. The example of a weekly celebration at Troas belongs to the period when the Holy Communion was still combined with the *agape* or love-feast, which was primarily a meal provided by the rich for the benefit of the poor (1 Cor. 11:20-22), and was therefore held every week. Separated from the *agape*, the Holy Communion does not actually *need* to be celebrated more frequently than its Old Testament antecedent, the annual passover-meal: what is necessary is regular and devout observance, not weekly observance. It is true that the Jews had other instituted ceremonies which *were* observed weekly; and that for Christians the ideal is that *all* the corporate means of grace should be available as often as corporate worship is observed, that is, weekly; but the ideal is not always the same thing as what is attainable.

2. Extended Communion?

Having adopted the principle that Holy Communion should be administered in every church each Sunday, David Smethurst considers various ways of achieving this. There are four possibilities.

(a) *It could be done by ordaining more people.* If enough people were ordained, every church could have its own celebration of the sacrament each Sunday. The introduction of A.P.M.s (Auxiliary

Pastoral Ministers), to fill which rôle a number of non-stipendiary clergy are now ordained each year and give help in their spare time or retirement, is a step in this direction. However, their numbers are not sufficient to meet the need, and could apparently only be made sufficient by ordaining men without gifts for teaching or pastoral care, simply to celebrate communion. This, as he rightly says, would be like reviving the mass-priests of the Middle Ages, and would be an abuse of ordination.

(b) *It could be done by authorising lay celebration of communion.* This would be extremely controversial, of course, and would have the same effect as the previous expedient, authorising men who lack gifts for teaching or pastoral care to celebrate communion, though without actually ordaining them. Lay celebration in emergency, like lay baptism in emergency, may be acceptable in the eyes of God, but the emergency of imminent death is a different thing from the deprivation of having the sacrament less frequently than every Sunday. Lay readers could hardly be authorised to celebrate, as well as to perform their existing duties, without actually being ordained as A.P.M.s, and most of those willing to take this further step have probably by now become A.P.M.s. But to authorise those who did not have the gifts or qualifications of lay readers to celebrate would seem to be highly questionable. Mass-laymen would be no more edifying than mass-priests.

(c) *It could be done by use of the reserved sacrament.* Reservation separates the administration of the elements from the other instituted acts (the taking and breaking of the bread, the taking of the cup, the giving of thanks, and the repetition of Christ's interpretative words) in such a way that the recipient takes no part in them, even as a witness, since he is absent when they occur. Reservation, moreover, is a practice which strongly suggests that these earlier acts have brought about a permanent presence of Christ in the elements, of such a sort that nothing is needed but to receive the elements and one receives Christ. The Reformers, however, rejected the idea of a localized presence in the elements and emphasised the unity of Christ's institution. They therefore abolished reservation.

(d) *It could be done by extended communion.* Extended communion is a practice which approximates to reservation, but draws attention to the other instituted acts by administering the sacrament as soon as possible after they have occurred. Nevertheless, they have still occurred elsewhere, in the absence of the communicants. Some of the Reformers used extended communion in ministering to the sick, and Cranmer included it for this purpose in his first Prayer Book, though he abolished it in his second, in response to Peter Martyr's pointed objection that Christ's interpretive words are addressed to the recipients and not to the elements—an objection with which Cranmer, in his maturer thinking, evidently agreed. It

follows, that to introduce this practice today, as a means of achieving Cranmer's ideal of having an administration in every church each Sunday, only achieves it at the expense of departing from another of his ideals, whereby every communicant witnesses the whole of Christ's institution.

3. The Use of the A.S.B.?

If, however, extended communion is less than ideal, it hardly seems desirable to expand it from ministry to the sick, where the new services authorise it, to worship in church. Indeed, a different way of ministering to the sick themselves would be preferable. Yet in hospitals, where there are many communicants scattered among many wards, extended communion often seems the only practicable solution. This need not be the case, however, if one is using the Prayer Book rather than the A.S.B. For the sacrament is always administered, in each ward, with a few prayers; and if one is using the Prayer Book, one of these prayers can be the consecration prayer, which in the Prayer Book is short not long, and, with its manual acts, includes (in principle at least) the whole of Christ's institution. The same, of course, applies to the consecration prayer of the form 'following the pattern of the Book of Common Prayer' in the A.S.B. Rite A (sections 57-75), but not to the other eucharistic prayers of the A.S.B. Even 'A Eucharistic Prayer for Use with the Sick' (Rite A, section 84) is long by comparison, and includes no manual acts.

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