

The Parish Communion

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IT is doubtless something of a generalization to say that in recent years the Anglo-Catholics have rediscovered the Bible and the Evangelicals have rediscovered the Church. But in so far as there is any truth in the latter statement, it is perhaps scarcely surprising that Evangelicals, having rediscovered the Church, should also have rediscovered the sacraments and have come to appreciate in a new way their significance in the life and worship of the Church. In the present article we are concerned only with the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and our purpose is to examine the place it should occupy in the worship of the parish church.

As far as the evangelical churchman is concerned, there are two matters of importance upon which he will require assurance in the matter of eucharistic practice. (i) Inasmuch as he is an *Evangelical* he will wish to be certain that the practice he adopts is in harmony with the gospel way of life as set forth in the New Testament. The question here will be, "What saith the scriptures?" (ii) Inasmuch as he is a *churchman*, he will wish to be sure that his practice is in line with the teaching of the Church of England; and the question here will be, "What does the Prayer Book say?" Hence it will be well if we begin this study by examining briefly the biblical and anglican position in regard to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

I

This is not the place to attempt a detailed survey of the scriptural evidence on this subject, but an unprejudiced study of primitive church history can point in only one direction. "Students of the Bible as diverse in their theological and ecclesiastical outlooks as the Anglo-Catholics and the Plymouth Brethren have arrived at the identical conclusion, namely, that in the purest days of the Church's faith and worship the Lord's Supper was regularly received by all practising Christians on the Lord's day: that it was in fact the one really central and distinctive act of Christian worship which bound them both to their Lord and to one another."¹

It is significant that in the earliest description of the life of the Christian community given to us in the New Testament there is a specific reference to the Lord's Supper (Acts ii. 42), indicating that from the very beginning of its organized life the Church regularly observed the "breaking of the bread" in accordance with the Lord's command. And it is because the Lord's Supper was so regular and normal a feature of the Church's life in the apostolic age that it finds such infrequent mention in the record of The Acts. Indeed, the silence

¹ This quotation and much of the material used in this article is taken from the chapter on the Administration of the Sacraments in *The Living Church in the Parish*, a symposium edited by Frank Colquhoun (Church Book Room Press, 1952).

of the New Testament in this respect—a silence which has sometimes been misunderstood and from which quite false conclusions have been drawn by certain protestant writers¹—is the most eloquent testimony to the fact that the Lord's Supper was firmly established in the Church's worship from the very beginning. So much was this so that, like other regular features of church life, it called for reference only incidentally (as in Acts xx. 7), or to illustrate some aspect of Christian truth (as in 1 Cor. x. 16, 17), or in case of its abuse (as in 1 Cor. xi. 17ff). In connection with the latter passage, it is noteworthy that the apostle does not rebuke the Corinthian church for neglecting the sacrament or not observing it regularly, but for the irreverent and unworthy manner in which they were celebrating it. It is clear from the way he writes that the divine ordinance was then (A.D. 56 or 58) an established feature in the worship of the primitive community; and what was thus true of the Church at Corinth was doubtless true also of the Church in every other place.

Without pursuing the biblical evidence further it may be well to quote the verdict of Calvin on this point. Protesting against the Roman practice of withholding the sacrament from the people he wrote, "It is evident from St. Luke in the Book of Acts that communion was much more frequently celebrated in the primitive Church; and that continued for long in the ancient Church, until this abomination of the mass was set up by Satan, who so caused it that people received communion only once or twice a year"; and his study of the scriptures led him to the conclusion that "The Lord's Supper should be celebrated in the Christian congregation once a week at the very least".

This brings us to the Anglican teaching on the subject; for Calvin's view of eucharistic practice was shared by the English reformers and found embodiment in the Book of Common Prayer. The reformers' aim was to abolish the sacrifice of the mass and to put in its place a scriptural communion service as the main act of worship. Their desire was to do away with the objectionable habit of non-communicating attendance ("hearing mass" without receiving the sacrament), to make the Lord's Supper a genuinely corporate and congregational service, including the communion of the people, and to restore the preaching of the Word as an integral part of the worship.

It is clear that the Prayer Book intends the Holy Communion with sermon to be the principal Sunday service in the Church, for in this service alone provision is made for (i) the giving out of the church notices; (ii) the preaching of the sermon; and (iii) the taking of the offertory. This is done because it is assumed that the Holy Communion will be the principal occasion when the people of God meet together for their worship on the Lord's day. It was certainly not the intention of the reformers that morning and evening prayer should become the chief diet of Sunday worship or that they should be a substitute for the Lord's Supper. They were provided as subsidiary acts of worship for daily use, and their great value lies in the provision they make for the regular recitation of the psalms and the reading of the scriptures.

¹ "The argument from silence can be used to prove almost anything that the wild theorist about history imagines" (Sir William Ramsay, *The First Christian Century*).

It is no disparagement of them to say that they cannot be placed on the same level as the Holy Communion, which was ordained by Christ Himself and which, as the Prayer Book recognizes, must have its own distinctive and commanding place in the worship of the parish church.

II

It must be admitted that much of our present day practice in regard to the Holy Communion does not fit into the Prayer Book scheme of things and cannot be regarded as satisfactory. Instead of occupying a really central place in the Church's worship the Lord's Supper is relegated to the circumference, being celebrated (generally speaking) either at an early hour in the morning when only a comparatively few people are likely to be present, or tacked on to one of the main services as a kind of liturgical luxury or pious extra. Moreover, instead of being a really corporate act of worship, uniting the whole body of the faithful at the Lord's table, it has in practice the effect of dividing them, owing to the multiplicity of celebrations at different hours attended by various groups of people. And yet again, instead of being regularly combined with the preaching of the Word, as the Prayer Book directs, the Holy Communion is frequently celebrated without a sermon, thus ignoring the reformed emphasis upon the unity of Word and sacrament. It might have been thought that evangelical churchmen of all people would not have failed at this point; yet the fact remains that there are many clergymen who, while scrupulously adhering to the rubric which directs that the priest shall stand "at the north side of the Table", blithely (or blindly?) ignore the later rubric which dogmatically affirms "Then shall follow the Sermon". Perhaps after all we ought to admit that the Anglo-Catholics are not the only people who seem inclined to interpret the Prayer Book a bit inconsistently.

Be that as it may, it is scarcely surprising that a deepening desire should have manifested itself among Evangelicals of recent years to restore the Holy Communion to the centre of the Church's life in conformity with the teaching of the Bible, the ideals of the Reformation, and the practice of the Evangelical Revival.¹ The result has been the introduction in many parishes of what is known either as the Parish Communion or the Family Communion; and while in some quarters this is still regarded as something of an oddity or an innovation, it is in actual fact simply an attempt to celebrate the Communion in the manner laid down in the Prayer Book, i.e., in its complete form, including the ministry of the Word, and as a fully congregational act of worship. There would appear to be nothing very revolutionary about this; and yet surprisingly enough there are large numbers of church people to-day to whom a communion service of this kind is virtually unknown.

In many churches the Parish Communion is now a weekly affair and is the principal act of Christian worship on a Sunday morning. In an increasing number of evangelical churches there is a monthly equivalent of this under the title of the Family Communion, when the Lord's Supper takes the place of matins or evensong as one of the main

¹ See the Rev. Gwyn Rogers' article in this issue on "The Holy Communion in the Evangelical Tradition".

Sunday services. This is a far more happy state of affairs than resorting to what is vulgarly known as "mangled matins"—the wretched attempt to blend morning prayer and Holy Communion into one service by using bits of each. A straightforward communion service on Prayer Book lines, accompanied by a sermon and with the addition of suitable hymns and music, is a deeply impressive and richly edifying act of worship and serves to bring the sacrament back to where it properly belongs, into the very heart of the corporate life of the parish. In this way the sense of fellowship is restored and the service exercises a unifying influence among those who thus kneel together at the same Table and partake of the one bread. Incidentally it may be mentioned that a monthly Family Communion of this kind also makes a welcome change from the usual order of morning prayer—or it may be evening prayer, since in some parishes the evening is found to be the more suitable time for the service; and there is something particularly appropriate about this in view of the fact that the original service in the upper room was an evening communion.

III

It remains to consider some of the difficulties and objections which are sometimes brought forward. In the first place there is the inevitable criticism of those extreme protestants who are suspicious of any attempt to give the Holy Communion a place of greater prominence in the life of the Church and who solemnly warn us that it is possible to make too much of the sacrament. No doubt that is true; but it is equally possible to make too little of it and to fail to honour the dominical command. Evangelicals at any rate are far more likely to fall into this error than the other. It is plain that those who raise this kind of criticism are motivated by what John Wesley called "an overgrown fear of popery"; yet to anyone with the most elementary knowledge of liturgical matters, it must be obvious that there is nothing popish about the Parish or Family Communion, inasmuch as it stresses the preaching of the Word and the communion of the people and is a recovery of a great Reformation insight. In regard to the whole subject of the Lord's Supper there is a certain evangelical obscurantism which needs to be faced quite honestly, but which for the most part can be dismissed as being the fruit of ignorance and prejudice.

An objection is sometimes raised to the Parish Communion on the ground that it encourages the wrong kind of people to come to the Lord's table, i.e., those whose Christianity is merely nominal. This is a danger which has to be faced at all times, particularly at the great festivals, but scarcely less so at an early celebration on any Sunday. At the same time this raises the larger issue as to whether it is our duty to "fence" the Lord's table and to encourage only those to be present whom we judge to be soundly converted; or whether we should not rather invite all sincerely professing Christians (that is, those who have been confirmed) to exercise their privilege of partaking in the sacrament. Of one thing we may be sure, that in doing so they will be brought face to face with the gospel of the Cross. In St. Paul's phrase, Jesus Christ will be clearly set forth before their eyes, crucified among

them (Gal. iii. 1) ; and for some it may well mark the beginning of a new and deeper Christian life. It is worth remembering in this respect that the Wesleys were accustomed to regard the Lord's Supper as a *converting* as well as a *confirming* ordinance ; and their own wide experience bore this out. A really living communion service can scarcely fail to bring a spiritual challenge to any unconverted people who may be present.

Finally, there is the difficulty which arises in regard to non-communicating attendance. In actual fact this is not likely to create a very big problem. In any case there is a world of difference between a few unconfirmed people or children being present at a communion service as observers, and the kind of situation with which the Reformers had to contend in the sixteenth century, when the whole congregation met together simply to "hear mass" without any intention of communicating. In reality, there are only three classes of non-communicants likely to be present at a Parish Communion. (i) The first class consists of children who are too young to be confirmed ; for them, attendance at the service is an excellent preparation for their later communicant life. (ii) Then there are adults who are not full church members and who, therefore, are not entitled to communicate ; to them the service must present a powerful incentive to seek confirmation and thus to enter into the full life of the Church. (iii) Last, there are the confirmed church-people who shrink from receiving the sacrament through mistaken notions as to the sanctity of the ordinance or the unworthiness of their own hearts. Such should be encouraged to draw near with faith and to take the holy sacrament to their comfort, thereby appropriating for themselves all the benefits of Christ's passion.

Let one further word be added. As far as the present writer is concerned, practically all the objections he has heard raised against the Parish or Family Communion have come from those who have never tried it. On the other hand all who have made the experiment have testified to the deep enrichment which has come to the life of the parish when the Lord's Supper has thus been enthroned in the centre of its worship and fellowship.

The Revision of the Communion Service

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IN an article in *Theology* a few years ago, Dr. Oscar Hardman suggested that the best process of Prayer Book revision is piecemeal, and that it should be spread over a long experimental period. This suggestion has been embodied with safeguards in the recent "Church and State" report, and in the resolutions passed in the debate upon it in the Church Assembly.¹ It is tempting to ask whether the last fifty years have not in fact been an experimental period ; certainly the variety of uses at present indicates that the living worship of the

¹ Report of the Church Assembly Commission on Church and State, p. 30.