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Whatever happened to the Lord's Supper?*

JAMES D. G. DUNN

RECENTLY I was unwise enough to make a few passing comments regarding current practice of Holy Communion. These excited some interest and resulted in an invitation to a study day on this theme. Hence the title! I should make it clear that I speak primarily as a New Testament scholar, who is also a local preacher, and that the views are very personal. Whether they are also idiosyncratic and not worth further consideration is something I must leave to you. I speak of the Lord's Supper, since that is the oldest title we have for what we are talking about (1 Cor. 11.20), but if others prefer to speak of Holy Communion, the Eucharist or the Mass, that's fine by me.

1. The origins of the Lord's Supper

We should remember that there are two major tap roots of the Lord's Supper.

a) *Jesus' table-fellowship*. We for whom a meal is often a rushed cup of coffee and a piece of toast, or a hamburger taken on the run from a station buffet, need to realise afresh the importance of meals in the ancient world, and still today in other cultures. The meal was an expression of friendship and hospitality. To break bread with another was to share something of that person's life. Lawrence of Arabia tells somewhere of an occasion when he was fleeing across the desert from the Turks. He came across a bedouin encampment where they had just prepared a meal. As was the custom he was invited to partake. And as soon as he had dipped his hand into the common dish and eaten he explained his plight. Without more ado the bedouin family broke camp and took Lawrence off with them away from danger. By eating with them he had become one with them.

The meal was also something sacred. In Jewish circles the meal would begin with a saying of the blessing over the bread, before it was passed round for all to partake from. To partake of the common bread was to share in the blessing spoken over the bread. This significance was underlined all the more strongly by some of the main groupings within Judaism at the time of Jesus — particularly the Pharisees and the covenanters of Qumran. For them table-fellowship was an essential expression of their faithfulness as members of the covenant people — an act of devotion whose sacredness had to be protected from defilement by those who were less scrupulous in their observance of the law.

Table-fellowship was also a feature of Jesus' ministry. He was notorious, indeed, as 'a glutton and a drunkard' (Matt. 11:19)! He accepted many

* A talk delivered to a Study Day at Brunswick Methodist Church Resource Centre, Newcastle upon Tyne, in February 1991.

invitations to meals, and seems to have hosted a number himself. Much of his teaching was evidently given in the context of a meal — what later became known as 'table-talk'. And quite a number of his parables featured a meal or banquet theme. As with the Qumranis, he saw these meals as having a religiously symbolic significance — they should reflect the character of the banquet in the kingdom of God (e.g. Luke 14:7-24).

But Jesus' practice of table-fellowship was offensive to other religious practitioners. And what proved to be offensive was its *openness*. Many Pharisees were surprised, not to say outraged, at his readiness to eat with tax-collectors and sinners (Mark 2:16-17; Matt. 11:19; Luke 15:1-2) — that is, with people whose practice showed they were not serious about religion. The very people the devout should avoid were the people whom Jesus was glad to eat with. He was defiling the sacredness of the table and what it represented! The Qumran Essenes would probably have been even more put out. For we know from the Dead Sea Scrolls that they had strict rules on who should be excluded from the congregation of the faithful — particularly the maimed, the lame and the blind. For the community to be perfect before God, such imperfection had to be excluded — from both community and meal table. But Jesus insisted that these were precisely the people who should be invited to the shared meal (Luke 14:13,21). Jesus made a point of including in his table-fellowship the very ones debarred by the Qumran covenanters.

I go into such detail simply because the Last Supper must be seen within the context of Jesus' established and regular practice of table-fellowship. This was the last of the shared meals which Jesus enjoyed with his disciples. Of course it was more intimate than so many of the others. But this would hardly have been the first time that Jesus ate alone with his immediate circle of disciples. And it is hard to imagine that this last meal together did not share something at least of the character of that more established practice. At the very least we have to speak of a shared meal which expressed the openness of divine grace to the sinner which was a feature of Jesus' whole ministry.

b) *The Passover*. The other major root of the Lord's Supper is the Passover. I need not remind you that this was instituted to commemorate Israel's deliverance from Egypt (Exod. 12). The only point which need be noted here is that it was a meal. Prominent in the passover meal were the bread, in this case unleavened bread, and the use of wine. Although there were some preliminaries in the case of the passover, the meal proper began, as usual, with the words of blessing spoken over the bread followed by its being broken and distributed (cf. Mark 6:41). In the course of the whole meal no less than three, and probably already four, cups of wine were drunk by all the participants.

In both cases, therefore, at the back of the Lord's Supper is a meal, a meal whose significance lies in the fact that it was sharing of food and drink together. In one case, a meal eaten in company as expressing the character of Jesus' mission and the fellowship of the kingdom of God. In the other, a meal as re-enacting Israel's history of salvation as focused in the Exodus.

We who know that the best way to get to know friends and to celebrate friendship is to share a meal with them should not find it so difficult to appreciate that significance.

2. The Last Supper

a) *The meal itself.* There are several questions regarding the Last Supper which it is now difficult if not impossible to answer. Not least among these whether it was indeed a Passover meal, and if so whether it was held at the time when others would be eating the Passover meal or a day earlier. All we need note here is that our most ancient source (Mark) clearly intends it to be understood as a Passover meal (Mark 14:12ff.), and that whatever its precise character the Last Supper was certainly a meal.

The uncertainty regarding the character of the meal adds to our uncertainty as to where precisely in the meal the bread and the wine came. In any case the bread would be taken at the beginning of the meal proper, blessed, broken and distributed as usual. This would be the point at which Jesus gave the new and added significance to the customary and familiar action. But if it was a Passover meal, which of the four cups was it that Jesus singled out as of special significance? Probably the last one. The key feature here is the account of both Luke and Paul that Jesus took the cup 'after supper' (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25).

In each case the point to be noted is that we are not dealing with isolated actions (using bread and wine), but with actions which were part of a larger action (a complete meal). Coming at the beginning and the end, they bracketed the meal; the meal was contained between them. Their significance thus lay, in part at least, in their relation to the meal as a whole. Coming at the beginning and the end, they summed up the meaning of the meal as a whole. They brought to focus the shared experience of table-fellowship with Jesus and of the passover celebration of Israel's redemption.

b) *The words of institution.* Here there are still more questions. For we have different versions of what Jesus said. Each version appears to be a brief elaboration of a more basic common formulation. But even then there are two different versions of the basic formulation over the cup. Reduced to the bare essentials of common tradition we find what we may call a Matthew/Mark version and a Luke/Paul version.

Matthew/Mark

This is my body

This is my blood of the covenant

Luke/Paul

This is my body

This cup is the new covenant in my blood

The substance is clearly the same. But the emphasis is different. In Matthew and Mark the focus is more on the elements — the bread and the wine. The two words are already set out in parallel, even though separated by the meal ('This is my body; this is my blood'). In Luke and Paul there is more focus on the covenant, a fact highlighted by the lack of parallel between the formulations.

We should beware of reading too much into these differences. But one difference may be quite important. For the different forms of the second word may well imply that Jesus' death was being understood as different kinds of sacrifice. In Matthew and Mark the sacrifice brought at once to mind would be the sin offering, in which the victim's blood was the centre of significance (Lev. 4-5). In Luke and Paul the sacrifice indicated is rather that of Exod. 24:5-8, the sacrifice which instituted the covenant between God and Israel.

Once again we should beware of exaggerating the difference, since the two different sacrifices could easily merge into one another in significance. This was probably already happening within the Judaism of Jesus' day. And certainly the first Christians found no difficulty in bringing together different categories of sacrifice to describe the death of Jesus. However, one difference is worth noting. A sin offering could be a very individual act, although we should also remember that in the Day of Atonement ritual it served for the whole people (Lev. 16). But the covenant sacrifice was the very opposite of an individual act of piety. It was an act of and on behalf of the whole community.

In short, once again we see how integral to the founding traditions of the Lord's Supper is the communal dimension. Actions with bread and wine, which cannot be isolated from the meal which they began and ended, and the significance of which they brought to focus. A word over the cup which emphasized that what was in mind was no individual act of devotion as such but a corporate act, a shared experience.

3. The Lord's Supper

As is well known, there is remarkable little said about the Lord's Supper as celebrated during the New Testament period. The preservation of the accounts of the Last Supper, however, is a clear enough indication that its memory was cherished. And the different versions of the 'words of institution' are likewise clear enough indication of frequent re-usage, and of the different developments in practice (no doubt as between different churches) which resulted in the different versions.

a) *The meal.* We know from Acts that the first Christians continued the practice of table-fellowship which had been such a feature of Jesus' ministry. The breaking of bread' was evidently a common tradition from the first (Acts 2:42). 'Day by day . . . they broke bread in their homes, sharing their food with glad and generous hearts' (2:46).

Whether this language refers to or contains a reference to the Lord's Supper is disputed. A Yes answer is suggested by the account in Acts 20:7 where Paul delays departure from Troas in order to break bread with the Christians there on the first day of the week. But the gathering continues through the night, in the course of which they break bread again, which sounds like a 'meal break' no doubt much needed in what had become a half-day (or even full day) meeting (20:7-11). And the final reference in Acts needs also to be recalled — 27:35. After fourteen days driven by the storm and without food, Paul urges the ship's company (276 in all) to eat, to

keep up their strength. Then he takes bread, gives thanks (the normal Jewish custom), breaks it and begins to eat. And the rest follow suit.

In all these cases it is hardly possible to confine the reference to the partaking of a small piece of bread. The 'breaking of bread' must be a Lukan formula for a shared meal. And if the Lord's Supper was included, at least on some occasions, that simply underlines again the fact that the Lord's Supper was celebrated as part of a meal and not as having a significance separable or distinct from the meal.

In the only other reference to the Lord's Supper as such (1 Cor. 10-11) the point is the same. The Lord's Supper was part of a meal. The words over the bread would be spoken at the beginning of the meal, and the bread distributed in the usual way. And the words over the cup would be said 'after supper'. A whole meal came between the two words. It was not the case that they constituted a sacrament distinct and separate from the meal. They were sacramental as part of the meal. We might even say that they brought to focus the sacramental significance of the whole meal. At the very least we have to say that they expressed the congregation's character as the people of the new covenant in a way also and complementarily expressed in the whole meal shared by the whole gathering.

This comes out in two other ways in the same passage. One is the apparently deliberate ambiguity in Paul's talk of the 'body'. He uses it both for the bread representing the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16; 11:24, 27), and for the congregation as a whole (10:17). The point once again is that what is envisaged is not an act of individual piety, but an act which expresses the oneness of the body, the corporate and interdependent character of the congregation as Christ's body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:14-27). The ambiguity probably extends to 11:29, since 'not discerning the body' must at least include a reference to the abuses at the common meal which Paul writes to rebuke. Again the point is clear: the oneness of the body as expressed in the sharing of the one bread is not separable from the common participation in the whole meal.

The other element of note is the emphasis Paul places on the act of *sharing*. That in fact is the dominant note in 1 Cor. 10:16-30 (*koinonia* — verse 16 twice; *koinonos* — verses 18, 20; *metechein* — verses 17, 21, 30). The point is that the oneness of the body (the congregation) is not constituted solely by the oneness of the body (the bread). It is constituted by the shared act of eating the bread. The *sharing* of the *one* bread is what demonstrates and brings to reality the *oneness* of the community. That was why the disorders at the common meal were so serious. They contradicted, and indeed rendered ineffective that which was symbolized in the specific acts of eating the same bread and drinking the same wine. And that was because the two things were not conceived of as separate or separable.

Once again the point is clear: the significance of the bread and the wine was part and parcel of the significance of the whole meal. Or to put the point quite bluntly: the Lord's Supper was not (simply) the sharing of the bread and the wine; the Lord's Supper was a supper. A complete meal is referred to, the meal as a whole (1 Cor. 22:20-21). To conceive of the bread

and wine partaken in isolation from the whole meal, and thus to be unaffected by the disorders of the Lord's Supper as a whole, was the error Paul was most concerned to rebuke.

b) *How was it administered?* Given however that the bread and the wine could be singled out within the whole meal (1 Cor. 10:16), it is at least possible to ask how they were 'administered' — even if the word carries connotations of later understanding and practice and is probably inappropriate for the time of Paul. The brief answer is: In no particular way, beyond the repetition of the words of the Last Supper (but, as we have seen, in different versions). And if we further ask, by whom were they 'administered', the answer is even briefer: By no one in particular. There is no indication anywhere in the New Testament that it was thought necessary to reserve the repetition of the 'words of institution' to special or specified individuals.

This finding ties in, of course, with the more general point regarding the idea of priesthood within the New Testament churches. I need hardly remind Methodist people that in the New Testament there is no conception whatsoever of a special class of priesthood within the churches of the New Testament. The picture indeed is wholly to the contrary. Where the topic comes up, it is quite clear that for the New Testament writers the old need for a special order of priesthood to act as intermediaries between God and his people is no more. The language of priesthood is now used only in two ways. Either of Christ alone (particularly Hebrews); all that the old order of priesthood represented in the Old Testament has been summed up in and superseded by Christ as the only mediator now needed between God and his people. Or of the people as a whole (as in 1 Pet. 2:5, 9 and Rev. 1:6); since all can 'draw near' to God directly through Christ, all can be said to exercise the priestly privilege and function previously restricted to the special order of priesthood. This is why Paul can use the language of offering sacrifice and priestly ministry for any act of ministry on behalf of the gospel, as indeed for any act expressive of Christian commitment (Rom. 12:1; 15:16; Phil. 2:17, 25, 30).

All this strongly suggests that 'administration' of the Lord's Supper was not conceived of as a priestly act, other than in the sense that all acts expressive of the gospel and of Christian commitment could be so described. And it certainly confirms the unlikelihood that leadership at the Lord's Supper was confined to a specified few. The more the privilege of repeating the 'words of institution' was conceived as something special (but to put it even so may beg too many questions), the more likely that they could be said by *anyone* recognized as committed and responsible within the congregation.

Here we need to remember once again that we are talking about a meal. Also that for many decades the earliest churches met in private homes. The probability is, then, that the householder would act as host, and as such would be responsible both to begin the meal with the blessing and distribution of the bread, and to end it with the words over the cup to begin its circulation. In which case we should remember that several of these

householders were women — Nympha (Col. 4:15), and in the case of Prisca and Aquila the former seems to have been as or more prominent (Rom. 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16:19). This would certainly tie in with the leading role played by women in the churches of Rome (Rom. 16:3-5, 6, 7, 12).

The picture then is as clear as it can be. The Lord's Supper as a meal, expressive of the shared participation of the congregation in Christ, brought to focus in the sharing of the bread at the beginning and the wine at the end. A meal at which the words of institution would be repeated probably by the host, whether man or woman, or possibly by any other member known for his or her commitment to Christ and service of the gospel.

4. Developments since the New Testament

Here we have time to indicate only in broad outline the various developments — developments we may characterize as from Lord's Supper to Eucharist to Mass. There are three which are particularly worthy of note.

a) *The tendency for the bread and wine to become separate from the meal.* Over a period, probably already within the first century, but probably in different stages in different areas, the administration of the bread and the wine was brought together to become in effect a single rite. And the rite itself became something distinct from the meal of which it had previously been part. This may be implicit in the fact that the Matthew/Mark version of the words of institution are already set out in parallel; that is, in a form more natural when the two words are said as part of a single rite.

Much of this is guess work, since the few references still available to us are by no means clear on the point. But one practice which seems to have become established by the early second century was to observe the sacrament in an early morning Sunday service and to meet later (in the evening) for a common meal. So, at least, Pliny's description of the Christians in Bithynia round about 112 AD suggests.

By this time it had also become customary to call the meal an 'agape', or 'love(-feast)'. The extension of just this word ('love') to cover the common meal tells us much of the character of these early experiences of table fellowship in the name of Christ. It is not clear whether the earliest uses still include the Eucharist, as is probably implied in Jude 12 and in Ignatius's letter to the church in Smyrna (8:2) and to the church in Rome (7:3), written within a few years of Pliny's letter. But in subsequent usage the agape does seem to have been celebrated separately. The custom of holding agapes seems to have fallen into disuse during the third and fourth centuries.

The implication is clear, that as the eucharistic elements became more clearly distinct from the meal of which they had originally been part, the sacramental significance previously located in them as expressive of the fellowship of the meal as a whole became focused in the elements themselves.

b) *The tendency for the bread and wine to become understood as a sacrifice.* This development probably went hand in hand with the one just described.

Initially the language of sacrifice was used in a metaphorical way. A key text in the early second century was the prophecy of Mal. 1:11 -

From farthest east to farthest west my name is great among the nations,
and everywhere incense and pure offerings are presented to my name;
for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts.

These early Christians were claiming that this prophecy had found its fulfilment in them. They were the nations (Gentiles) who were presenting the pure offering which Israel had failed to present.

But what was this 'pure offering'? Certainly the language includes the Eucharist (so in Ignatius, *Philadelphians* 4; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 41). But the language included also the sacrifice of praise (1 Clement 35:12 and 52: 3-4; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 117), the ministry of widows (Polycarp 4:3), and talk of purity of life and conscience (Ignatius, *Trallians* 7:2). It remains an open question, therefore, whether these second-century Christians were really understanding the Eucharist as a sacrifice in some literal sense, or simply saw their worship and service in general (including the Eucharist) as that which fulfilled Malachi's prophecy.

On the other hand, we can readily understand how such metaphorical language would tend naturally to gain a more literal reference and one more focused on the Eucharist alone. The language of sacrifice thus introduced, and with specific reference to the Eucharist, would naturally tend to be understood as the Christian equivalent to the actual sacrifices which were a feature of more or less all religious cults of the time. At any rate, this is what happened, with talk of the Eucharist as a sacrifice becoming an established motif of the following centuries.

c) *The tendency for administration to become more limited and the celebrant to be understood as a priest.* This is a natural corollary to the last point. In the ancient world the only reason for having a priesthood was to offer sacrifice. A sacrifice required a priest. So, as the Eucharist came to be understood more and more as a sacrifice, it was inevitable that the one who administered it should be understood more and more as a priest.

The same question arises with talk of priesthood as with the language of sacrifice. Was it intended literally or in a transferred sense? 1 Clement 40-41 (before the end of the first century) describes the obligation of religious service in language drawn from the Old Testament and the Jewish cult. He talks not just of sacrifices, but of the High Priest, of priests and Levites, and of laity. But was this intended literally or in a metaphorical sense? At least in the case of the Levites it must be taken as metaphorical.

What is more clear is that when individuals came to be called priests in the early centuries the conception was of a representative priesthood. That is to say, the individual celebrating the Eucharist was understood as a priest because he was understood to represent the priestly people. It was the people who exercised the priestly function in their gathering for worship; the individual was a priest only in the fact that he represented them. This

point was demonstrated more than a century ago by J.B. Lightfoot, Bishop of Durham, in a famous essay on 'The Christian Ministry'. And it has been reinforced in the last decade or two by the Belgian Roman Catholic scholar, Edward Schillebeeckx . . . (*The Church with a Human Face*).

But once again we can well understand that such language opened the door to a more literal usage. First to the concept of the eucharistic celebrant as a priest in a literal way, which first comes to clear expression in Cyprian in the third century. And then to the concept of the priesthood as a different order within the church wielding a secret power exclusive to their order, as the church of Rome took over more and more of the role of the declining Roman Empire.

In all this it is easy to recognize the social pressures which the earliest churches were under and to sympathise with the extent to which they adapted to the normal patterns of religions of the time. The simple fact of the matter is that the first Christian groups were something of an oddity in the social context of the towns and cities of the Mediterranean world. All other religious cults had their priests and sacrifices. That is what religion was, how religions functioned. These first Christian home churches must have appeared very odd indeed to the good citizens of that time. A religion without cult centre, without priest, without sacrifice! Was this a religion at all? Even the friendly societies and trade guilds had their priests and sacrifices. What on earth was this new movement? Understandably, the pressure to conform to the normal cultural and religious self-understanding and practice over the centuries proved irresistible.

In the event we have to say that Christianity reverted to the Old Testament categories which the first Christians thought they had left behind. In the event we have to say that the Christians of second and subsequent centuries adapted to the religious spirit of the age. In the event we have to say that they abandoned in some degree the spiritual high ground claimed by the first apostles and disciples.

It is somewhat ironic to compare and contrast the Judaism which also emerged and began to take its distinctive shape during the same period — rabbinic Judaism. For in Judaism the key figure of ministry to emerge was the rabbi, that is the teacher, not the priest. It was Christianity which reverted to the Old Testament category of priesthood, not Judaism! Moreover, Judaism has managed to maintain a central focus on the sacredness of the family meal table in a degree and to an extent never really recaptured by Christianity after its 'first fine careless rapture'. It was Christianity which conformed to the spirit of the age, whereas Judaism maintained its distinctiveness, though not without its own cost.

5. Whatever happened to the Lord's Supper?

So, what did happen to the Lord's Supper? I am not going to suggest that it is either desirable or possible to return to the Christianity of the first decades. I am not going to imply that original is best or that Christianity could somehow have avoided developing and changing. But if we do regard the New Testament as canonical, as the constitutional documents of our

faith and worship, and thus as providing us with our primary definition of what Christianity is and should be, then it would seem to be important to draw attention to where our current practice and understanding of the Lord's Supper seems to differ or diverge from what we find in the New Testament. Whether that divergence is significant and should be remedied I leave for wider discussion. But it is at least possible that central theological principles expressed in that early practice have become clouded or lost sight of in the later practice.

We can sum up the position by drawing attention to four points at which subsequent, and now typical, current practice of Holy Communion seems to have lost something as compared with earliest practice. That is not to deny that subsequent and current practice has also gained other features which are very important, in differing degrees for different traditions. But here it seems appropriate to focus attention more on what we seem to have lost.

a) *The loss of the meal.* The bread and the wine which originally functioned as part of a complete meal are now quite isolated from a meal context. What once was the focus of a meal which expressed the fellowship of the kingdom has now become the nibble of a small piece of bread (or wafer) and the merest sip of wine (or fruit juice). Speaking personally, I have found this very difficult over the years. The table-fellowship of Jesus which embodied and anticipated the banquet of the kingdom of God I can resonate with. So too with a breaking of bread in friendly homes which was also the Lord's Supper. So too with an agape of which the eucharistic elements were part. But to expect a diced square of bread and a tiny sip of wine from an individual glass to carry the symbolism of the messianic banquet I personally find too hard. It puts tremendous strain on the symbolism — too much for me. If that is 'a foretaste of the heavenly banquet' I'm afraid I'm going to be awfully hungry. That's why I find it so difficult to join in the end of the final prayers after communion.

You may say I am failing to appreciate the power of the symbol. It's not quantity that counts, but quality. And I am very ready to recognize and respond to the power of symbolism. Indeed, I suspect that it's because I yearn for the richness of the symbol that I find the current symbolism of the bread and wine so impoverished and impoverishing. The symbolism which Jesus and Paul gave us was the symbolism of bread and wine as part of a meal. Whatever we have gained by subsequent developments, it seems to me that we have lost the richness of the fellowship symbolized by such a meal, that is, not only expressed in but also experienced through the fellowship of the meal table.

b) *The loss of the horizontal dimension.* One of the most important features of the original practice of bread and wine within a meal was its ability to combine both the vertical and the horizontal in the one act. By the vertical, of course, I mean our fellowship with God. By the horizontal I mean our fellowship with one another. That combination says something very important about Christianity. It reminds us in a very clear way that Christianity is *not* a religion of individuals, that we are related to Christ

through bread and wine only as a body, only as a group who together and in mutual interdependence form his body. Which reminds us in turn that our relationship with God is not and cannot be independent of our relationship with others.

But in the practice to which I have become accustomed in Methodism we seem to have put all the emphasis on the vertical. It is the action of individual piety and devotion on which the whole emphasis falls. Indeed, we seem to do everything to minimise the horizontal. We try to avoid real contact with our fellow communicants. Nothing should be allowed to disturb the sacredness of the moment of vertical communion. The kneeling at the rail even inhibits any real personal communion with the one administering the bread and wine; to make eye contact involves an unnatural cricking of the neck. Such a sharp divorce between the vertical and the horizontal seems to me to be theologically unsound and spiritually unhealthy.

In recent years the issue has come to focus in the Peace. In the opportunity to share Christ's peace with our neighbours we have a rare, and in our tradition regrettably uncommon opportunity to express the horizontal — that is, to function as the body of Christ rather than as a bunch of individuals. I suspect that there is often more genuine communion experienced over the cup of tea following a service than in the service itself. To that extent the shared pot of tea is a more sacramental experience than the shared bread and wine! I am fairly confident that Jesus and the first Christians would have recognized this, since the shared meal was so important in their common life of worship. I suspect also that they would have been amazed, stunned, shocked even, by our current practice.

Some of the correspondence on this subject in the *Methodist Recorder* has been particularly depressing. As though the recognition that we are part of the one body and the expression of that recognition by sharing Christ's peace with our neighbours could be a threat to our devotion to God. As though our communion with God could be sustained independently of our communion with our fellow worshippers. When vertical and horizontal become so much at odds with each other, there is surely something wrong.

It is perhaps worth noting that the modern Roman Catholic liturgy puts the peace *between* the great prayer of thanksgiving and the administration — thus effectively demonstrating the integration of vertical and horizontal. Jesus was making the same point when he said in effect, Do not come to the altar unless you are at peace with your neighbour (Matt. 5:23-24). And Paul's warning against eating the bread and wine without regard for other members of Christ's body makes the same point (1 Cor. 11:27-29). It is precisely this integration of the two, the vertical with the horizontal, which was such a feature of early practice of Communion and which our traditional practice seems to have lost sight of.

c) *The loss of the sense of being a priestly people.* When the language of priesthood is used in reference to the churches of the New Testament, this

is the dominant sense — of a priesthood shared by all and not exclusive to any within the body of Christ. And when the idea of a representative priest emerged in the early church, it was of the individual as priest only because and insofar as he represented the priestly people. But in our current idea and practice of representative priesthood we have turned the theology upside down — the ordained minister as priest as representing the historic eucharistic tradition. The original idea of the officiant as enacting the priestly role of the people, as expressing their common priestly function has been lost sight of.

The Reformation is often credited with the rediscovery of the priesthood of all believers. And insofar as it stressed that Christ is the only mediator between God and his people, and that the individual believer can go direct in prayer to God through Christ without the mediation of priest or saints, that is true. But beyond that the Reformation failed to recover what we might call the believers ecclesial reality of the priesthood of all believers: that all share a common priesthood and that there is no order of priesthood peculiar to a few. As Milton put it so forcefully: 'New Presbyter is but old Priest writ large'. Our traditional practice of mono-ministry, of in effect putting all ministry on to 'the ministry', has left the other 99% of the body of Christ virtually paralysed (no wonder the body of Christ is weak and ineffective). And in terms of Holy Communion, the recognition of the priesthood of the people has virtually to be rediscovered afresh, so deeply buried within our traditions has it become.

This I believe is why the almost complete loss of the dimension of lay administration of Holy Communion which was part of the Primitive Methodist tradition is so serious within Methodism. The Wesleyan conformity to the traditional understanding and practice of ministerial priesthood in the other main Christian traditions was a regrettable denial of the ideal expressed in the New Testament. In this case, the loss of the Primitive Methodist feeling for the ecclesial priesthood of all believers was also a loss of the primitive ideal of the first Christian churches.

May it not be, then, that the current shortage of candidates for the ordained ministry (priesthood) in all denominations is God's way of reminding us that the principle of the priesthood of the whole people of God admits of no differentiation within it (whatever 'good order' might determine in particular instances)? The alternative may be the re-emergence of 'mass priests' — ordained clergy who have less and less time for anything other than repeated celebrations of Holy Communion for increasingly dispersed congregations. Or the theological nonsense of the 'reserved sacrament', where authorised 'lay' people take the consecrated elements from some centre to dispersed churches — as clear a denial of these churches' priesthood and body-of-Christness as one could imagine. Our own practice of 'dispensations' seems an unhappy compromise between an unconstitutional theology (requiring a special order of priesthood) and such wholesale denial of our churches' shared priesthood.

d) *The loss of diversity in our expression of communion.* In cultures where the shared meal is still of great religious significance, the richness of that

communal experience is retained through a cycle of festivals including a diversity of meals (our modern substitutes include Cup Final day and Grand National day). So, in the beginning of Christianity, Jesus' table-fellowship, the breaking of bread, the agape, probably had a diversity of form and content — as one would expect in the spontaneous character of such communion round the meal table.

As for the Lord's Supper (in the narrower sense) itself, it is noticeable that in the New Testament there is no single 'order' envisaged. Even the core 'words of institution' are different in the four versions we have. No one thought it of importance that there should be an unvarying form, to be repeated in just the same words on every occasion. The words first spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper were not carved in stone, to be carried about from Lord's Supper to Lord's Supper like some sacred relics, to be displayed and repeated in exactly the same terms every time. As though only so could they preserve the unity of tradition between the churches. As though only so could a valid Eucharist be celebrated.

Contrast this with the movement of ecumenical convergence — the growing conformity of liturgical, particularly eucharistic usage in our churches. The trouble is that convergence means narrowing. And the danger is that such narrowing will squeeze out some of the rich diversity of our varied (including biblical) heritage. In other traditions this is not so serious; they have retained alternative orders of Holy Communion. But in the case of Methodism the effect seems to have been to reduce our communion service to one and only one form (in more than twenty years I have never been present when the 1936 order has been used). Where others have been able to maintain something of the freshness and richness of our richly diverse heritage (including different musical settings for the congregational parts), we seem to have fallen into the trap of thinking there is only one way properly to celebrate God's mighty acts.

This is not to deny, of course, the theological and liturgical wealth which is squeezed into the words of the great prayer of thanksgiving in the Sunday Service. But in a day of increased frequency of communion it is hard to avoid a staleness creeping in when the same words are repeated time after time. The fact is that *no* single form of words is able to contain or express adequately the amazing richness of divine grace. To limit ourselves to just one form is effectively to deny that richness and to confine that grace to too narrow channels. Even the naïve question might be appropriate here: a diversity of form and wording was thought necessary by the first followers of Jesus, so why not for us?

6. A concluding thought

Well, there I've said it. Pardon me the degree of self-indulgence in 'letting off steam' like this. Though you did encourage me to speak my mind. And perhaps I should not apologise for feeling deeply about such important matters.

Nor would I want to suggest (if any of the above is true and relevant) that there are easy answers. It's a bit of the 'If you wanted to get where you want

to go you shouldn't be starting here' problem. I certainly don't think we should all go out and try to organise agape meals in our chapels. Artificial table-fellowship would be worse than none (we can all no doubt remember supper parties or guest meals which went horribly wrong). The communion of the Lord's Supper should grow out of and be an expression of the shared experience of God's grace which we already enjoy. And there *are* situations where a celebration of the Lord's Supper in a meal context would be a most natural and fitting expression of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. I think particularly of house groups or Lenten groups which have met over a number of weeks. Since they probably approach as near as we are ever likely to get to the reality of the earliest Christian churches, they might well be the test-bed for the development of new (yet old) celebrations of the Lord's death until he comes. Sad, though, if we can only do so by importing a priest who has not been a member of the group — not much of a celebration, then, of our common priesthood in Christ.

Response: JOHN MUNSEY TURNER

ONCE shocked some Anglo-Catholic clergy by saying that perhaps an early Christian eucharist was more like a chapel tea than a solemn high Mass! Dr Dunn's article is a salutary reminder to those who thought that the famous 'four-fold shape' of the liturgy and the findings of the Liturgical Movement, featuring Hippolytus, enshrined in the Mass of 1969, the *Methodist Service Book* (1975) and the *Alternative Service Book* (1980) are sacrosanct. Liturgical convergence once so desirable is now seen as a bore! You can't win!

So I welcome Professor Dunn's article. His summary of the very scanty New Testament evidence seems fair, though do we *really* know what happened in the drawing room of Prisca, Lydia, or Phoebe?² Was C. K. Barrett right (raising Lietzmann's ghost?) in pointing to an original resurrection meal which, due to Corinthian chaos, was developed by Paul himself into a meal proclaiming the death of the Risen One? 'There is a strong case for supposing that it was Paul who associated the Last Supper and the Lord's Supper with the Christian fellowship meal in which all believers pledged their loyalty to the Lord who they believed was truly but invisibly present.'

But if Barrett calls up Lietzmann, Dunn seems haunted by the ghost of 'Frühkatholizismus' (early Catholicism), the change from the marvellous freedom of the children of God to the 'faith fatigue'⁴ of the sub-apostolic age. Dunn attributes the changes to the 'pressure to conform' to the spirit of the age. But is not this interplay between church and culture inevitable?⁵ Is not some 'routinization of charisma' normal due to increase in sheer size of the church? We see it now in what is happening to the 'House Churches' of the 1970s. Is this always some kind of fall from a pristine community

which can be romanticized? Dunn's argument could have a flaw in that when he calls us to a scriptural norm, he omits the step in the argument which would have to state that a crystallization of tradition in canonical scripture goes along with more institutionalized forms of ministry and credal formulae as a response to the crises which befell the Primitive Church including the death of James, the Fall of Jerusalem, persecution and gnosticism, not to speak of the delay of the Parousia. When is legitimate development proper and when does poison get into the church's bloodstream? Presumably it is when 'old presbyter' becomes 'new priest'. Isn't it much more complex than that?⁶

But let us look at our traditions, since Dr Dunn calls up the Primitive Methodists as better examples than those dreadful Wesleyans. Primitive Methodism is fascinating here. The early pioneers thought more of the *Lovefeast* than of the Lord's Supper.⁷ They found true sacramental experience here. The first reference to Holy Communion at a Conference is in 1841 when, after a great celebration, bread was sent back to the circuits as a kind of 'extended communion' — a practice Dr Dunn scorns! The president at the Lord's Supper could indeed be a lay person at the behest of the Superintendent Minister. This would normally be a local preacher and it is clear that quarterly was the usual frequency after a preaching service. Some Primitive Methodist churches (under Quaker influence) never celebrated communion.⁸ A. S. Peake defended the Primitives from the charge of a low view of ordained ministry. 'Be it ours to have a high doctrine of the ministry just because we have a high doctrine of the church, to regard the ministry not as possessed of any priesthood which it does not share with the laity, but to recognize that the priesthood finds its fullest organ and most intense expression in the activities of those who are fully dedicated to its service.'⁹ This view is expressed in the Deed of Union of 1932 and in different ways in recent statements on ordination.¹⁰ The present Methodist custom of 'dispensations' of Conference where there is gross deprivation of sacramental life, allowing probationers or lay workers or the diaconate to preside at Holy Communion, seems wholly in line with such a doctrine of ministry. It expresses, too, a connexionalism which avoids sectarianism.

What of present practice?

a) Maybe there is scope for a renewal of the Love Feast in a modern style — Indeed this is now a frequent feature of ecumenical services including Roman Catholics.¹¹

b) Dr Dunn raises the question of *style* in Methodist Communion. Where did our often stereotyped custom of 'going up in tables' originate? Could it now be laid aside as we express corporateness more informally? The rubrics of the *Sunday Service* are much more flexible than many ministers realize! An entirely 'free' service is quite 'proper' despite the risk of over-wordiness and loss of what purists would deem vital elements. Any new service book would need a variety of eucharistic prayers. Do individual glasses detract from the 'horizontal' aspect Dr Dunn stresses? Dig the chalice out of the cupboard! So many of Dr Dunn's suggestions could be attained with the use of a little creative imaginativeness.

The Dialogue Continued: JAMES D. G. DUNN

I WELCOME the positive responses from JMT, GSW and SJW. They exemplify just the sort of discussion which I hoped my little, all too personal, *cri de coeur* would evoke. It is precisely by means of such dialogue that I see the body of Christ moving forward in its endless quest for more adequate or fuller expressions of our common faith and life.

On some points raised I hope that what I have already written is clear enough to indicate what my response would be. Here I can only offer some points of clarification.

1. Yes, of course, it was all more complex, JMT. But I do not in fact subscribe to the theory of a sub-apostolic fall from grace. My point was different. (a) We ought to take more seriously the canonical status of our scriptures. Within tradition as a whole (including scripture) the NT must therefore be allowed to function as a critical check, a norm within the norm. In his commentary on the documents of Vatican II, Cardinal Ratzinger acknowledged the force of Protestant criticism on this point. My question then was, and is: Are there principles and emphases in the NT teaching on the Lord's Supper which have become eroded or obscured in subsequent and current practice? When issues and practice become highly complex there is almost always a good case for consulting once again first principles.

(b) The emphases characteristic within the NT were in fact sustained well into the second and subsequent centuries, despite initial appearances, that is, despite the way later tradition read the early fathers in the light of their own developed ecclesiology. This is also Lightfoot's and Schillebeeckx's point.

2. Any ecclesiastical practice which effectively denies the dominical word, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matt 18:20), is surely open to criticism. Of course we must try to maintain the tension between unity and diversity, between flexibility and structure. My question is simply whether in the changing circumstances of today (including not least 'the decline in vocations') the 'priesthood of the two or three' cannot be more fully expressed without endangering the unity of the whole. The history of Christianity has many reminders that in times of change conformity must be relaxed to give scope for vitality; the inflexible structure can absorb change only by breaking!

3. In particular, I fully understand the 'representation' principle and recognize its force, JMT. Though we should beware of a double-think here: for if the 'representativeness' of our Communion is dependent on the rest of the Church acknowledging that representativeness (i.e. 'recognizing our orders'), we are indeed in a sad plight. My point, however, is that the other, older side of the representation principle has been too much ignored — the 'president' as properly representative of the priestly people assembled as Christ's body. Does it need to be said again that the congregation is constituted Christ's body only by the presence of Christ? The question is: How is that presence most appropriately represented? Moreover, SJW, has the belated emphasis on the ministry of the whole people of God not yet

taught us that the more functions and authority we entrust to any single member of the body of Christ, the more we incapacitate the rest of the body? The ordained ministry will be the most obvious representative and enabling focus in most congregations, but (in principle and in practice) not necessarily the only one and not necessarily in all congregations or in all circumstances.

4. A fuller treatment would have given more space to the actual words of institution (GSW); my point was that more attention needs to be paid to their context. And SJW, is it not the case that NT principle and practice incorporated but also moved *beyond* Jewish precedent, not least in consigning firmly to the past any distinction of priest from people?

5. 'Let everything be done decently and in order' (1 Cor. 14:40). But is the danger confronting the great majority of our societies that of enthusiastic disorderliness, GSW? Where there is lack of vitality an emphasis on good order may stifle rather than nourish the life of the Spirit. It is hard to beat the good order of a well maintained cemetery!

Most of the above disagreements of emphases should resolve into a 'both-and' rather than an 'either-or'. But how do we prevent the former polarizing into the latter? Let dialogue continue!