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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Evangelicals and the Holy Communion

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DURING 1938 and the early months of 1939 a Round Table Conference met at Lambeth Palace, at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Cosmo Gordon Lang, to consider the meaning of "Lawful Authority" in the Declaration of Assent.

It was a representative cross-section of the Church of England, bishops, clergy, laymen and women, about fifty in all, under the genial chairmanship of Archbishop William Temple. It had obviously been intended to bring together, in particular, those who had been divided in the Prayer Book controversy of 1927-8, and to include some ecclesiastical lawyers, of whom the most prominent was Lord Sankey.

Very early in the Conference we reached the conclusion that the only legal connotation that could be given to the term "Lawful Authority" in this context was the King in Council, and that the only way to obtain order and discipline out of the present liturgical chaos was to reach, if possible, mutual agreement on permissible deviations from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and to seek legal ratification of these by a Measure.

So we settled down to discuss the departures from the text and rubrics of the Prayer Book, which had become more or less widely recognised and practised by those who still desired to be regarded as loyal Churchmen. On the more simple and practical uses we soon reached a large measure of agreement, but on the customs which involved doctrinal issues, especially in the Holy Communion, we discovered tensions which threatened the break-down of the Conference.

At this point we were asked to confer with like-minded groups in our several localities and report back at our next meeting. And it was when I gave an account of the reactions of a group of clergy, partly parochial and partly collegiate, which used to meet every term at Wycliffe Lodge, Oxford, that I ventured to put forward a suggestion to Archbishop Temple that we might reach a more satisfactory, because less superficial, basis of understanding and possible agreement, if the representatives of different traditions in the Church of England had the opportunity of presenting to the Conference in a positive and constructive way, the special insights of doctrine and worship which seemed to them most vital. The chairman liked the proposal, but the war-clouds were gathering over Europe and the Round Table Conference did not meet again.

So I followed up the thought in another way. I approached the Principal of St. Stephen's House with the proposal that in the Summer Vacation term each college should invite the other once to a corporate Communion in each Chapel alternately, in which the customary use should be observed in its entirety; and that this inter-communion should be preceded on the previous evening by a corporate Evensong, at which the Principal or Vice-Principal should give an address, frankly

and devotionally expressing the positive teaching of his college on the Holy Communion.

In my view the experiment was abundantly justified. It helped to remove ignorant prejudice, and to foster spiritual fellowship, while (as far as I am aware) it made our men more appreciative than ever of their own Chapel.

Be that as it may, it seems to me that I should use this as an opportunity of expressing some of the great positive insights of our faith as Evangelicals, as we find them enshrined in the Prayer Book service of Holy Communion, and thus of showing why we hold fast to so precious an heritage, and resist those innovations—or rather retrogressions—that would rob us of it.

In this endeavour I take as my text the title which Cranmer gave to the Reformed Service in 1549, "The Supper of the Lord and the Holy Communion, commonly called the Mass." From the first the keynote was struck. The last phrase was intended to make it clear that this Service was taking the place of the old Latin rite.

In 1552 it was changed to the present title, which has remained ever since, "The Order of the Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion."

The twin phrases of this title summarise, as I believe, all that we hold most dear in the doctrine of this great Sacrament of the Christian Church.

I

First then, the *Lord's Supper*.

This is the earliest name that is given to it in Scripture, St. Paul's great phrase in I Corinthians xi. 20. It takes us back straightaway to the Upper Room, where our Lord so greatly desired, and therefore planned, to eat the paschal meal with His disciples. It reminds us that all our interpretations of the Sacrament must be submitted to the test of the Upper Room and the circumstances of the Institution.

The paschal meal was a memorial of a great deliverance: so is the Lord's Supper. Sacrifice was the price of that deliverance, the blood of a lamb sprinkled upon the lintel and the door-posts. Sacrifice is the price of ours, the "blood of the New Covenant", through which we have entrance into the very presence of God. The Israelites were to eat it with unleavened bread, prepared for a journey. The Lord's supper reminds us that we are pilgrims and sojourners here, but citizens of heaven, where we shall sit down with the redeemed at God's Board.

But the real emphasis is not on the Supper, but on the *Lord*, as it is in 'the Lord's Table', 'the Lord's day', and 'the Lord's people', which is the literal meaning of our word 'Church'.

Alas, too often we advertise the Church instead of manifesting Christ. We talk about the services of the Church, the growth of the Church, the achievements of the Church. Of course the Church is (at least ideally) the Body of Christ, but the Head of the Body is Christ. And the *raison d'être* of a body is to express the character and purpose of the person who inhabits it. There is no Church apart from Christ, and "where Christ is, there is the Church". So there is no Lord's

Supper unless the Lord Himself is there, presiding over it as Host. That is why Evangelical Churchmen believe in the real Presence of Christ throughout the service. The Prayer Book makes no suggestion whatever that His Presence becomes real or more real at any point in the service. And that is because the Prayer Book is scriptural. Nowhere does Scripture attach a special presence of Christ to the Holy Communion. There are only two promises of Christ's presence in the New Testament, namely where two or three are gathered together in His name, there He is in the midst (St. Matt. xviii. 20); and wherever His servants go into all the world, in obedience to His command to 'make disciples of all the nations', there He is with them all the days, even unto the end of the world (St. Matt. xxviii. 20). In both cases it is a spiritual Presence, i.e. in the Spirit. "(The Father) shall give you another Paraclete, that he may be with you for ever . . . for he abideth with you and shall be in you. I will not leave you as orphans: I come unto you."

Of course, it is true that many worshippers are specially conscious of Christ's Presence in the Lord's Supper. That is easily understandable, because in that rich many-sided service there are gathered together, I suppose, all the conditions which facilitate such consciousness. But we are going beyond the warrant of Holy Scripture if we constitute our special consciousness into a special Presence.

We are on sure ground when we state our Evangelical belief in the Presence of our Lord, at once in the heart of all believing recipients of the sacrament, and (more objectively, if you like) in the midst of the worshipping congregation: but we recognise no distinction in time between the beginning of the service and the end, and no difference in space between the sanctuary and the porch.

In the vestry of the new Chapel at St. Lawrence College, before its dedication in 1927, I hung a copy of a German picture called "The Presence". It shows the interior of a great church, in which the Holy Communion is being celebrated with brilliant ceremonial. Near the west door kneels the figure of a woman afar off, who does not so much as lift up her eyes unto the high altar. And behind her stands the compassionate figure of Christ. A visiting preacher, a diocesan bishop, looked at it and remarked, "I like that picture, because it denies nothing." Being a humble headmaster, I did not reply, but the retort sprang to my mind, "Yes it does, it denies a monopoly to the East end."

But it is one thing to score a debating point. It is quite another to believe in that Presence from the commencement of every celebration—especially when there are only two or three there—and to show that belief in every posture and word.

Particularly it is our glorious privilege as Ministers of the Word and Sacraments to exhibit in the Lord's Supper the perfect combination of word and dramatic action in this Sacrament of the Gospel. The climax, of course, comes in the words of Institution, which are expressly ordered to be accompanied by the manual acts and to be visible to the congregation—"that he may break the Bread before the people", as the rubric directs.

For it is here that we have vividly represented the great acts of our Redemption in Christ Jesus.

First, He took the loaf and called it His body—the body which He took in the womb of His Mother at the Incarnation. “When he cometh into the world he saith—‘Sacrifice and offering (of bulls and goats) Thou wouldest not, but a body didst Thou prepare for me. . . . Lo, I am come, to do Thy will, O God’.”

Secondly, He blessed it by giving thanks. That represents His life and ministry on earth, when He recognised all that came to Him as the gift of God, and blessed it by seeing God in it, and by revealing Him through it.

Thirdly, He brake the loaf, signifying His passion, the sacrifice of Himself for the sins of the world.

And lastly, He gave the life, thus broken, for the sustaining of the souls of men, representing His resurrection and ascension, when He gave gifts unto men, and supremely gave Himself in and through the Spirit.

To illustrate the intimate and vital connection between the Word and the sacramental action in the Lord's Supper, it is well to notice how the Comfortable Words, which first appeared in the short English “Order of the Communion” in 1548, emphasize in the same way the acts of our Redemption, thus :

The Incarnation—	“His only-begotten Son,” “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”
The Life and Ministry—	“Jesus Christ the righteous”, “Come unto Me . . . and I will refresh you.”
The Passion—	“He is the Propitiation for our sins.”
The Ascension—	“We have an Advocate with the Father”.

Time forbids me to develop the interdependence of Word and Sacrament further than to remind you that in this service the sermon or one of the homilies is directed to follow the Nicene Creed.

What I must, however, emphasise in the presentation of the Gospel contained in the Comfortable Words, and in the manual acts of the Institution, is that the central focus of it all is the Cross. Hence one of the earliest names for the sacrament was “the *breaking* of bread” (cf. Acts ii. 42 and Luke xxiv. 35).

The Lord's Supper is “the sacrament of our redemption by Christ's death.” As the wonderful Prayer of Consecration expresses it, in words which show little change from the original form of 1549, He “made there by His one oblation of Himself once offered a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.”

Is it not this once-for-allness of the finished work of Christ which makes us repudiate any re-introduction of the doctrine of the Eucharistic Sacrifice into the Prayer Book, with the same downright thoroughness as that with which Cranmer cut out in the 1552 Revision all those passages in the 1549 Book which Bishop Stephen Gardiner said were patient of such an interpretation?

Our abhorrence is based upon two strong scriptural grounds.

(1) That the conception of Christ presenting His blood and pleading His sacrifice before the throne of heaven is blasphemous to the Father. Did not "God so love the world that He gave His only-begotten Son"? Did He not "send His Son to be the propitiation for our sins"? And was not God "in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself"? Why then does He need to be entreated for mercy? No, as Bishop Westcott wrote in his commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, "Christ pleads by His Presence on the Father's throne," seated on the right hand of the Majesty on high.

(2) Our second objection is based on the doctrine of Justification by Faith, or as it is more fully stated in the Prayer of Oblation, "by the merits and death of Thy Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in His blood." The New Testament makes it abundantly plain that we have no part or parcel in the work of our redemption: we must trust wholly in Christ and in Him alone for salvation. Therefore the oft-repeated "sacrifices of masses in which it was commonly said that the Priest did offer Christ for the quick and the dead . . . were blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits." So says Article XXXI, and it still holds good.

II

Little space remains for the second phrase in the title of the Prayer Book, which is more commonly used and therefore more familiar—*The Holy Communion*. It is doubtful, however, whether the proper significance of the word "Holy" is usually understood. The Prayer Book is not lavish in its use of gratuitous adjectives. Unlike some modern clerics, it avoids the unctuous application of the word 'holy' to anything and everything connected with the Church. The 'holy gospel' for instance, is a technical term for the passage from the Gospels which is appointed to be read after the Epistle. Nowhere in the Prayer Book (as far as I am aware) do we find 'Holy Baptism' because in the New Testament it is simply called Baptism. Communion or fellowship, however, is a fairly common term in the New Testament with a wide range of use. And so the Communion of the Body and Blood of Christ is distinguished by the prefix 'Holy'.

It is therefore primarily communion or fellowship with Christ that is meant. It is with Him that we meet in this service, and are strengthened by His fellowship. Such a privilege is not to be reserved for the few. Holy Communion is sometimes in danger of becoming "the gentlefolks' service", whereas it should be available for all, whatever their circumstances.

We rejoice that this is becoming increasingly recognised by different types of Churchmen, and that the practice of Evening Communion is growing. We must encourage this movement by helping people to see that fasting is only useful if it makes for alertness and receptiveness, not if it hinders these. We want quite rightly to give God our best, and some people find that they can do this most readily at the end of the day, and particularly after the quiet preparation of Evening-song.

And sacramentally communion with Christ is focussed in the act of Communion. Our Lord broke the bread, in order to give it to the

disciples. And the service is incomplete without reception by the worshippers. That is certainly the intention of the Prayer Book, which expressly forbade non-communicating attendance down to 1662, when such an order was no longer necessary. And that was certainly Cranmer's intention in breaking up the ancient Canon, and bringing the communion of the people right into the middle of the central part of the rite, so that it followed immediately after the communion of the priest and before the Prayer of Oblation, on the principle that we have nothing to give to God until we have first received from Him.

First, "Take, eat and drink this", then "here we offer and present unto Thee ourselves, our souls and bodies". It is the same principle that we find in the 116th Psalm—"What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits towards me? I will *take* the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord." Then, and only then, "I will offer to Thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving." Similarly our Lord said to His chosen Apostles, "Freely ye have received, freely give" (St. Matt. x. 8).

But there is a further reason for the Prayer Book insistence on the participation of at least two or three communicants at every celebration. It is that the Holy Communion is a feast of fellowship for Christians. "Drink ye *all* of this," Christ said to His disciples. His broken body is the bond of union for the living body of His Church. Is not that the most potent argument for inter-communion? For in the Holy Communion we find the fellowship of humility, kneeling all on the same level before Him—young and old, learned and unlearned, rich and poor together.

We find the fellowship of joy also, joy in the assurance of pardon, knowing, as we receive in turn the consecrated bread and wine, the handshake and the kiss of His forgiveness; joy too in the assurance that "we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of His Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful people."

And here, in passing, I would make a strong plea that the lovely Prayer of Thanksgiving, from which I have just been quoting, should not be left as a rarely heard alternative to the Prayer of Oblation, but that both should be used regularly together as they were in the great service of Holy Communion during the Prayer Book Commemoration in York Minster on May 19th last.

And finally we are united in the joy of our Lord's triumph, as we lift our voices in the "Gloria in Excelsis", that great paean which blends the praises of Christmas and of Easter, in adoration of the King of Heaven and of the Lamb that sitteth upon the throne. "For thou only art holy; thou only art the Lord; thou only, O Christ, with the Holy Ghost, art most high in the glory of God the Father. Amen."