



into the Melting Pot

the question is more important than the answer

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Communion: Bridge or Barrier

The following article is scanned from Progressive Voices 28 (March 2019), the publication of PCN Britain, and was written by Edward Hulme. He was ordained as a Baptist before joining the URC. He has promoted progressive Christianity through preaching, teaching, lecturing and writing.

Is Communion a bridge or is it a barrier to spiritual growth, to Christian faith, to God?

A hallowed bridge

The great majority of the worldwide Christian family, I surmise, view the occasion as a hallowed bridge over which God's 'holy energy' may pass to nurture the innermost self, or soul, of communicants.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, it is deemed so special that much of its observation takes place beyond an icon screen dividing 'earth' where the congregation gathers and 'heaven' which only priests may enter.

For Roman Catholics, Mass is pre-eminent among their seven sacraments and central to church life. It is celebrated wherever priests are available and is the climax to great gatherings, such as those that take place on international papal visits.

Across the Anglican spectrum, the Eucharist is the central sacrament and widely believed to be a superior means of spiritual nurture to the Ministry of the Word.

Practice varies widely in Free Churches. In some, the service is barely distinguishable from mainstream Anglican practice with participants going up to the 'altar' rail. In others, conduct of 'The Lord's Supper' is simple and brief with stewards, deacons or elders taking the elements to the seated congregation.

So, for most of Christendom celebration of Communion is a crucial feature of Church life, if not its apex, and regarded as a 'holy bridge' conveying the Grace of God to those sharing in the rite. Generally, the flow of divine power is supervised by an ordained or appointed officiant. For Roman Catholics, the supreme bridge is the Pope, appropriately named Pontiff. What's more, many, if not most communicants, find the celebration uplifting and enriching. They like the poetry and beauty of the language, the colourful vestments and graceful rituals, the mystique and mystery evoked by the 'bells and smells', the ceremony's witness to the suffering and self-giving of Jesus, and its befriending power expressed in the sharing of The Peace.

But is it really vital to discipleship?

Two numerically small yet disproportionately influential Christian 'churches', the Salvation Army and Society of Friends, don't observe Communion at all. Yet who would deny the profound godliness of their members and the Christ-like work they do? Salvationists take the teaching and example of Jesus with the utmost seriousness, serving the marginalised

of society with a passion. Quakers apply Jesus' message of reconciliation to a degree greater than any communion-practising church. Both are strong and wide bridges of the transforming goodness and love we identify as God.

I am also reassured by the major shift in the BBC Radio 4 Sunday morning worship pattern. In contrast to previous practice, services which include Communion have become the exception. Recognizing that its celebration limits the opportunity to explore important worship themes adequately, the forty-minute slot now provides time for relatively in-depth exploration and reflection. As exemplified by a service in 2016 from Manchester's Roman Catholic Church of the Holy Name. It nevertheless facilitated a 'surge of grace' as it unpicked and applied the Pope's momentous Encyclical Letter 'Laudato Si' on care for our 'Common Home', planet Earth. I feel that this urgent message to all humanity is far more Kingdom-building than any Communion ritual.

My lukewarm attitude to Communion goes back to childhood when I attended a Baptist church. Apart from the odd Children's Address, the main service was one to be endured rather than enjoyed. But the Lord's Supper which followed, one morning a month, was the last straw, with its interminable extempore prayer of thanksgiving that habitually became a prayer for everything under the sun. Though I was bemused by the clinking that reverberated round the church when communicants returned the little glasses to their holes in the shelf in front. When I went away to school and attended the 8:00am Church of England Communion service I felt very virtuous, but I'm not sure whether it really helped me be a better disciple. And, to this day, I remain unconvinced that the ritual is the vital and incomparable bridge of grace many claim it is.

What did Jesus intend?

My overriding concern stems from the story which gave rise to the ritual - about what happened in that upstairs room shortly before Jesus's arrest and execution, and what Jesus intended by his words and actions. The short answer is we cannot be certain. For the Gospel writers were more interested in meaning than historicity. The words we use in Communion today are the result of a hazardous process involving memory, oral tradition, written reports, editing and translation. However, in spite of hindsight and interpretation, the story we have is extremely likely to have a factual core for it centres on a searingly memorable experience. Aware that the authorities were closing in and that it would be the last chance for them to sup together, Jesus took the opportunity to invite the Twelve, whenever they met to eat and drink in the future, to let the bread and wine be reminders of his life, ministry and imminent self-giving. Such remembering would be important for his immediate, as well as subsequent, disciples.

And yet, put in the context of Jesus' entire ministry of between two and three years, the 'last supper' was but a brief moment, its essence described in just four verses in Mark and Matthew, seven in Luke, and only three in Paul's first letter to Corinth. So, has the Church I wonder, got an originally brief and simple act - a tiny fragment of Jesus's ministry - out of all proportion?

The Church's focus on the death of Jesus, through its various forms of Communion, is further emphasised in its historic declarations of faith. The Apostle's Creed, for instance, jumps from Jesus being 'born of the Virgin Mary' straight to his suffering 'under Pontius Pilate' and subsequent crucifixion, death and burial. There is no mention whatsoever of his ministry with its transforming teaching, all-embracing compassion and vital commitment to building the 'Kingdom of God'. In contrast to the Sermon on the Mount anthology which is all about conduct and life-style, most Church liturgies elevate belief and doctrine. Surely, exposition of Jesus' life and ministry - through Bible reading and sermons, for instance - is at least an equal 'bridge of grace'.

A barrier to faith?

Another feature of the Gospel story that bugs me centres on the imagery Jesus used, and whether he wanted it to be taken literally. Since so much of his teaching and conversation engaged poetry and parable, isn't it reasonable to believe his association of bread with his flesh and wine with his blood was purely metaphorical? I hope I'm right for I find, in the light of science (a vital avenue of truth about the nature of reality), the claim that the Communion elements really do become the body and blood of Jesus, as the 'high Church' doctrine of transubstantiation affirms, totally unbelievable. What's more, I find a literal application of the imagery aesthetically repugnant with its 'overtones of cannibalism', as someone put it to me after a service in which I had used the traditional words. For those brought up in a secular and science-orientated environment - now the majority of British citizens - I suspect that too much of what goes on in church worship, not least Communion, could appear to be mumbo-jumbo, a barrier rather than a bridge to faith.

Whatever our personal thoughts, feelings and preferences, I believe the time has come to take a long and hard look at all our liturgies and in particular the place and nature of Communion.

We should rigorously re-assess its biblical status, its contemporary value, its form and frequency, and be prepared to change our priorities and practices accordingly.

We need to try and read the minds of the sceptical multitudes and ensure all our worship is a bridge, not a barrier, to the energising mystery we call God.

Edward Hulme

Acts 2:44-47

⁴⁴ All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. ⁴⁵ They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each one needed. ⁴⁶ Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.

1 Corinthians 11: 23-25 (context of eating food offered to idols, and inequality)

²³ For I received from the Lord the teaching that I passed on to you: that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took a piece of bread, ²⁴ gave thanks to God, broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in memory of me." ²⁵ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup and said, "This cup is God's new covenant, sealed with my blood. Whenever you drink it, do so in memory of me."

Mark 14: 22-24 (context of Passover meal)

²² While they were eating, Jesus took a piece of bread, gave a prayer of thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. "Take it," he said, "this is my body."

²³ Then he took a cup, gave thanks to God, and handed it to them; and they all drank from it. ²⁴ Jesus said, "This is my blood which is poured out for many, my blood which seals God's covenant."

Matthew 26: 26-28 (context Passover meal)

²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took a piece of bread, gave a prayer of thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. "Take and eat it," he said; "this is my body."

²⁷ Then he took a cup, gave thanks to God, and gave it to them. "Drink it, all of you," he said; ²⁸ "this is my blood, which seals God's covenant, my blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Luke 22:19-20 (context of Passover meal)

¹⁹ Then he took a piece of bread, gave thanks to God, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in memory of me." ²⁰ In the same way, he gave them the cup after the supper, saying, "This cup is God's new covenant sealed with my blood, which is poured out for you."

(Some manuscripts do not have the words of Jesus after This is my body in verse 19, and all of verse 20.)

Questions

What points raised by Edward Hulme strike a chord with you?

What is the place of ritual within your faith?

How important is Communion in the wider understanding of worship?

The 9:00am service now has a monthly communion – is this a backward step?

Do you have a strong view about the meaning of communion for your own faith?