

The Hour of Holy Communion

IN the previous issue of the *Annual*, Dr W. D. Maxwell indicated the doctrinal reasons for a morning hour of celebration rather than an evening, in an article called for by the growing practice of evening celebrations.

The present writer agrees in the main with all that Dr Maxwell has written, but further study has suggested these observations, not in a spirit of controversy, but with a view to guidance for instruction and practice in congregations where evening celebrations might become a substitute for morning observance.

(i) That the Lord's Supper gave the Passover meal a new significance and purpose is admitted; but it is not clear that the time of celebration was thereby changed from evening to morning, except that the earlier hour could be included in the idea behind the phrase: "This do ye, as oft as ye drink it".⁽¹⁾ The Passover was celebrated once a year, Holy Communion much more frequently.

(ii) That the Resurrection was determinative is also agreed; but is it not the case that the Lord's Supper recalls, and emphasises, the death, not of a good man, but of Christ, *i.e.*, recalls the whole of the Passion and the meaning of the Cross, rather than the fact of the Resurrection? St. Paul writes: "As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death, till He come".⁽²⁾ Worship on Sunday morning, as distinct from the Sabbath, stresses the Resurrection, and because Christians gathered on that day at an early hour to worship the risen Christ, it was natural that they celebrated Holy Communion, in obedience to the command: "This do, in remembrance of Me". It was the crucified Lord who rose from the dead and manifested His living presence where two or three gathered together, but they did not gather primarily to celebrate the sacrament at the early hour, but to worship at that hour. The celebration naturally followed.

(iii) The Emmaus incident on the first Easter evening has always impressed the present writer as being perhaps

⁽¹⁾ I. Cor. xi., 25. ⁽²⁾ I. Cor. xi., 26.

Both verses are used in the order for Holy Communion in the *Book of Common Order*, 1940.

the first occasion on which the command was actually carried out. The evangelist is silent, of course, as to what the disciples did when they were all informed of Christ's appearance and the breaking of the bread at Emmaus, but it appears likely that such an action would recall vividly to their minds the words and the commands of Jesus.

The conclusion would seem to be, therefore, that the hour of celebration, in itself, is unimportant, but—and this needs stress to-day—the hour of worship should be morning, because it recalls the Resurrection. The danger of an evening celebration is that God is worshipped solely at an hour convenient for the people. That ultimately puts man's convenience above the claims of God.

One way of overcoming the difficulty is to have a second Table as a continuation of the first (morning) celebration, making it clear to the worshippers that it is a continuation by using the Order suggested for this purpose⁽¹⁾ and not simply an alternative version of the usual order for morning celebration.

This would keep the doctrinal position clear, and would also allow for situations which do arise where parents with young children cannot both communicate at the same hour, and only if a second Table is provided can they communicate on the same day. There are cases where the principle underlying the statement that "the sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath" apply, though not so many as is often claimed.

The Reformed practice in Scotland was in line with a very early hour of celebration at Geneva (4 a.m.), and Dr McMillan has gathered several instances from 1550-1638⁽²⁾ some of which Dr Maxwell mentions in his article. That some consideration was given for the differing circumstances of the people, however, is suggested by the fact that in Edinburgh in 1574 Communion was celebrated at 5 a.m. "for the servants and sic others that pleases to come",⁽³⁾ while at Elgin a 3 a.m. celebration was "for servants for the most part".⁽⁴⁾ By 1656 the Communion service at Dunfermline Abbey commenced at 8 a.m., a service being held outside for non-communicants at 10 a.m. At that time the Communion lasted for two Sundays, and it is thought that in an earlier period where it was celebrated

(1) *Book of Common Order*, 1940, page 132-3.

(2) W. McMillan: *The Worship of the Scottish Reformed Church*, p. 190.

(3) *Ibid.* (4) *Ibid.*

on one Sunday only, the hour was earlier than 8 a.m.⁽¹⁾ Since that date, the practice has grown of celebrating the sacrament at the usual hour of morning worship, in the cities frequently 11 a.m., and in rural parishes 11.30 a.m. or 12 noon. In practice neither in country nor in town are all the communicants served before noon.

A point worthy of note, not unrelated to the foregoing, is the Preparatory service, continuing the idea, stressed by Dr John Kennedy,⁽²⁾ that Communion is not a service, but a season, beginning with a Preparatory service on Thursday, and ending with Thanksgiving on Sunday evening. Only if it is thus regarded does it achieve its purpose "of affording us an opportunity of withdrawal from the world".⁽³⁾ Without laying too much stress on numbers, the fact that a large percentage of the intending communicants in recent years absented themselves from the Preparatory service, led to the custom of making the preceding Sunday evening a service of preparation, thus making the Communion season last a full week, and ensuring that a greater proportion of the people would participate in the service of preparation.

To-day, there is a growing desire for more frequent celebration of Holy Communion, and a desire that churches of the same denomination at any rate should keep to the same Sundays. A fear has been expressed in some quarters that a more frequent celebration would take away from the solemnity of the occasion, and would lead to a lessening of members attending such celebration. It is interesting to note that where statistics have been kept, such fears are groundless. In a city of 100,000 inhabitants in a mission field, the Presbyterian Churches in the city celebrated the sacrament monthly, in the evening, except in January, with an additional celebration on Easter Day. Making all due allowance for the fact that the converts were a more "church-going" people, the percentage of members attending the monthly communion was as high as it is in this country. A pagan who had never heard of the Gospel would find it strange to discover any reason, apart from purely local tradition, for some of the "second", "third", or "last" Sundays of months apparently chosen at random, for the celebration of Holy Communion in some of our churches. He might, with some instruction, see a reason for celebration on some of the anniversaries of the old

⁽¹⁾ R. Stevenson: *The Communion in Dunfermline in the 17th century*, p. 17.

⁽²⁾ Kennedy: *The God Whom we Ignore*, p. 223. ⁽³⁾ *Ibid.* p. 224.

feast-days. But it would surely be incomprehensible that in many a Christian Church, as the worshippers gather on Easter morning, they fail to carry out Christ's wishes, and remember Him in the breaking of the bread and the out-pouring of the wine.

A more frequent celebration would probably clear away some of the practical difficulties for the people ; it would certainly give opportunity to stress the doctrinal significance urged by Dr Maxwell, and it would allow the worshippers to avail themselves more often of this means of grace, and raise Christian life to a more sacramental level.

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