

Intercommunion

It might seem that some apology were called for in the selection of what might be regarded as so hackneyed a theme as Intercommunion for this Presidential Address.⁽¹⁾ If so, my defence is that, to anyone active in affairs ecumenical, this is an ever-present problem and an increasingly pressing dilemma; while in regard to their own practice of intercommunion, the churches seem to be getting into ever greater confusion. Let me first say something about this latter situation.

Present Confusions

After centuries of very strict sacramental discipline in "fencing the Table", the Church of Scotland has now moved to the view that the Holy Table is open to all baptized believers in full communion in their own churches—a position sometimes adopted with an adequate theological basis, and sometimes without any very clear reasoning behind it. The present practice of the open invitation to the Lord's Table thus makes it possible for Anglican communicants to participate in the Lord's Supper in Presbyterian churches, which a large number of Anglican laymen appreciate and take advantage of, often contrary to the views and wishes of their clergy.

The Church of England—and it will be evident directly why I do not apologize for not referring to the Episcopal Church in Scotland at this point—has now officially legislated through its Convocations for certain circumstances in which members of the Church of Scotland may be admitted to Holy Communion at Anglican altars, subject to the consent of the Ordinary. Furthermore, the Episcopate in England, though the Convocations have never pronounced on this, has said that open or joint communion services may be held at gatherings met for the express purpose of

⁽¹⁾ This paper was read, on 16th October, 1956, as the Presidential Address to the Edinburgh branch of the Leighton Club. The Club bears the name of the gentle and eirenic Robert Leighton (1611-1684), successively Minister of Newbattle, Principal of the University of Edinburgh, Bishop of Dunblane, and Archbishop of Glasgow. It seeks to promote understanding, through common study and worship, between ministers of the Church of Scotland and of the Episcopal Church in Scotland. There is also a branch in Glasgow.

furthering Christian Unity. (We shall be returning later to the issue raised in that latter provision).

The perplexing situation has been produced wherein members of the Church of Scotland and of the Church of England may find themselves together at the Lord's Table, but members of the Presbyterian Church of England and of the Scottish Episcopal Church (each in full communion with and enjoying mutual eligibility of ministries with their corresponding confessional body across the border), cannot meet in that manner in an Anglican church.

Some of these arrangements, agreed by the Convocations, have been made under the plausible principle of *Economy*, but I do not think that this conception will bear very close theological investigation. If such facilities were regarded as coming within the Divine Economy, it might be a more defensible conception; but it would then render the ecclesiastical limits of such economy highly questionable.

But the confusion goes further. The Anglican Communion and the Church of Scotland both have arrangements for the receiving of their members at the Holy Table in the Church of Sweden, not to speak of the other Episcopal Lutheran Churches of Scandinavia. Thus there are Anglicans and Presbyterians permitted to receive the Body and Blood of Christ together at Lutheran altars who are not permitted, or when permitted, not encouraged, to be together at the Lord's Table in their own churches. Was that communion service, let us say at Upsala, when a Presbyterian and an Episcopalian from Scotland participated together, not something of a mockery, perhaps even a blasphemy?

The relations of our several churches with the Church of South India have brought the confusion and dilemma to a new intensity. To what degree is it honest to profess to be in communion with Christian brethren of the C.S.I., who in turn are in communion with other Christian brethren, to whom we deny this level of fellowship? Do we think we can divide or departmentalize or classify Christ? The scandal of it all grows with the increasing confusion manifest among the churches.

Challenging Questions

For myself, the pain and perplexity in all this reached a new intensity in Lambeth Palace Chapel in January this

year, ⁽¹⁾ when we who represented the Church of Scotland and the Church of England, along with two Bishops of the Episcopal Church in Scotland, and a minister and an elder of the Presbyterian Church of England, all received Holy Communion together according to the English Rite, with the Archbishop of Canterbury as celebrant. What did that occasion mean? If it meant *less* than it suggested, was it not verging on blasphemy? This is a painful issue which cannot be by-passed.

Incidentally this raises another very important question which I can only state. If even *one* single isolated occasion of communicating together has taken place among separated brethren, may they, dare they, ever again consider intercommunion in terms of the *status quo ante*? The *post eventum* situation is an entirely new one, spiritually regarded. God has acted, or else the sacramental occasion was less than the Bible teaches and the Church proclaims. God has acted upon us together: is there not a kind of apostasy from His reconciling Love, if we then presume to discuss the question of intercommunion *de novo*? This question requires the most profound Christian consideration.

Internal Church Discipline

It is easy enough to sketch the present confusion in practice, but can we unravel some of the misunderstandings behind it? I believe that one factor is that, in our separated churches, too many rules and rubrics which belong essentially to internal church discipline are now being applied to the sphere of inter-church relations. Indeed, those particular rules and rubrics arose when each land was absorbed in its own internal church life, and contacts with other churches were few and rare. It is highly questionable whether regulations regarding communicants under any church's own pastoral care and discipline have any bearing on whether or not baptized communicants in good standing belonging to another church should or should not be admitted to the Lord's Table.

The marks for recognizing a true church John Calvin found in the faithful preaching of the Word of God and the proper administration of the Sacraments of the Gospel, along with the proper exercise of discipline. It was this Scriptural emphasis on discipline, so vital an issue in the Early Church and in all the Patristic writings, that lay

(1) January, 1956.

behind the Church of Scotland practice of "fencing the Table" against unworthy participants. Only baptized Christian believers who "discerned the Lord's Body" were to receive His Body and Blood at His Holy Table. Calvin writes: "Regard must be had to the Lord's Supper, which might be profaned by a promiscuous admission. For it is most true, that he who is instructed with the dispensation of it, if he knowingly and willingly admits any unworthy person whom he ought and is able to repel, is as guilty of sacrilege as if he had cast the Lord's body to dogs. Therefore, lest this most sacred mystery should be exposed to ignominy, great selection is required in dispensing it, and this cannot be except by the jurisdiction of the Church".⁽¹⁾

Exacting internal discipline was part of the Reformed Church in Scotland from the outset, as expressed in the *Shorter Catechism* (A. 97): "It is required of them that would worthily partake of the Lord's supper, that they examine themselves of their knowledge to discern the Lord's body, of their faith to feed upon Him, of their repentance, love, and new obedience: lest coming unworthily, they eat and drink judgment to themselves".

The Church of Scotland of today, like most other churches, tends to be less rigid, and at times even slack in its internal discipline. But the important point to note is that when the Church of Scotland opens the Holy Table to communicants of other churches, it gives its invitation to those who are believed to be under the real pastoral care and sober Christian discipline of their own church. The Table is open to baptized communicant members "in good standing" in their own denomination. To be "in good standing", or to be, in that sense, "a worthy participant", is not, however, to hold a particular theological definition of the Lord's Supper or of Church Order; but to be, by baptism, "in Christ", and so within the life and under the discipline of His Church. (I shall return later to the subject of commitment and intention in regard to Christian Unity, as a fundamental premise in this opening of the Lord's Table to communicants of other churches, even where the "fencing" is exacting for those *within* our own cure of souls).

In the Church of England, the original *Book of Common Prayer* rubrics in the order of the administration of the

⁽¹⁾ *Institutes Book IV, Chap. XII, 5.*

Lord's Supper seem to me to be equally and primarily concerned with internal church discipline—the first, to ensure intimation of the names, presumably to ensure that they are “in good standing”; the second, to exclude the “open and notorious evil liver”,—within the congregation, be it noted; and the third, to exclude the unreconciled from the ordinance proclaiming reconciliation: The same outlook is found in the Exhortation. It is questionable whether a single rubric of the Prayer Book in its original intention was designed to exclude a communicant of any other Reformed Church, although in the sixteenth century the Reformation was taking different forms in different lands. Documentary support for this particular viewpoint is found in Professor Norman Sykes's *Old Priest and New Presbyterian*. (Cambridge University Press, 1956).

It is also of present passing interest to observe how the Convocations of Canterbury and York have been discussing the admission to Holy Communion of remarried divorced persons in terms of church discipline. Internal church discipline is of the greatest importance *within* a denomination, but it has nothing decisive to say about inter-church relations and intercommunion.

At this point, however, it is sometimes commented by Anglicans that episcopal Confirmation is required for admission to the Lord's Supper. The Order of Confirmation concludes with the rubric: “and there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion, until such time as he be confirmed, or be ready and desirous to be confirmed”. Like the other rubrics, this applies primarily to those regularly under the pastoral care and discipline of the Church of England. The requirement, moreover, for communicants is not “episcopal confirmation” but “confirmation”, although the bishop is designated as the appropriate minister for confirmation in the Prayer Book service laid down for Church of England practice. After all, the practice of “occasional Conformity” in eighteenth century England suggests that the Anglican Establishment was more concerned with persuading Englishmen to come to the Lord's Table than with the fulfilment of regulations domestic to Anglicanism.

The whole theology of Confirmation and admission to Holy Communion is in a confused state in all churches, and no church is readily satisfied with any exposition of Confirmation which even seems to suggest the incomplete-

ness of Holy Baptism. This makes it difficult to understand Anglican insistence on one form of Confirmation. Not all episcopal churches practise exclusively episcopal Confirmation; and the Lambeth Conference of 1920 agreed to intercommunion with the Church of Sweden, although "Confirmation in Sweden is simply an admission to communion by the parish priest, and contains no laying on of hands",—much less observably a rite of confirmation than the practice of the Church of Scotland. To say that confirmation by a bishop is necessary to admission to the Lord's Table would be to bind an Anglican idiosyncrasy on the universal Church, which, however great its practical value, is not the universal practice even of Romanism or Orthodoxy. The key to this dilemma of intercommunion does not lie in the realm of Confirmation.

Theological Proposition or Divine Act

If this confusion between internal church discipline and interconfessional relationships has clouded the subject of intercommunion, so have certain other lines of discussion, notably the plausible suggestion that we cannot sit together at the Lord's Table when our similar action means different things to us. This comes dangerously near humanizing a transcendent and sovereign Act of God. Is there even a vestige of Biblical support for the view that a particular doctrinal *interpretation* or a particular theological *definition* determines the effectiveness of the transcendent Act of God in His Word or Sacraments? Perhaps without noticing it, in this emphasis on the theological views of churchmen, we have lapsed into discussing not the Lord's Supper *per se*, but the ordinance of a particular church, forgetting that the whole conception of "churches" is foreign to the New Testament. Here again, let me quote the view of the Church of Sweden with which both the Anglican and Presbyterian traditions enjoy intercommunion, as these are summarized by Einar Molland: "As regards the Holy Communion celebrated in our churches, we see no obstacle against admitting to it all baptized Christians who earnestly desire to receive the body and blood of Christ in our Church. . . . This being the attitude of the Scandinavians, it will be understood that the practice and doctrine of the Anglicans as to intercommunion in our eyes implies a perversion of the right conception of the sacrament. It seems to make the sacrament a badge or token of Christian men's profession

(*nota professionis inter homines*) more than the sovereign action of God's redeeming grace".

It should further be said, on the topic of agreed views about the Sacrament seeming to be requisite, that not a single ecumenical council of the Church made agreement concerning the Lord's Supper necessary to receiving the Lord together in His own Sacrament.

The irrelevance of this diversity of view regarding the Eucharist needs to be asserted with great emphasis. If it were a pertinent matter, then it would produce schism within our separated churches themselves, where no one distinct theological view is required and where differences in theological view cross and recross confessional frontiers. The reality in the Sacrament is Christ Who gives Himself in Bread and Wine; the manner and the significance of the Divine Self-Giving are secondary to the transcendent reality.

Intercommunion and Christian Unity

A much more relevant and authentic discussion of Intercommunion, however, is centred in the issue of its relation to Christian Unity. The late Archbishop William Temple gave classic definition to one view of this: "To adopt intercommunion", he said, "in the sense of receiving the Eucharist at one another's communion services would have the effect of obscuring the main necessity for achieving the visible union of the whole Body, and would tend to suggest that the existing conditions can be made quite satisfactory". That great ecumenical leader was, I believe, correct, in so far as he was accurate in so describing the attitude of *some* representatives of sister churches from which his own Communion was separated. If the achievement of intercommunion were to be regarded as an end in itself, releasing the churches from the spiritual challenge to repent of their separateness and to seek the corporate unity of the Body according to God's Will, then the Archbishop's position would still be valid.

But that is no longer the situation to-day. Not only have we had about half a century of the modern ecumenical movement, but a new type of inter-church relationship has come into being through commitment in the World Council of Churches, and even more notably, through active participation in the Faith and Order Movement. The "we intend to stay together" of Amsterdam and Evanston means that the churches *are* seeking unity

according to God's revealed will for the Body, and the whole question of intercommunion arises in a new spiritual context. Intercommunion, no longer a danger for "obscuring the main necessity for achieving the visible union of the whole Body", which is now an agreed goal, has to be considered as a God-given means of promoting that reconciliation to which we are committed in repentance, expectancy and hope.

The Ecumenical Statement adopted by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1954 expresses the kind of commitment producing a new spiritual situation in which Archbishop Temple's discerning caveat is no longer required: "The Church of Scotland, believing in one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and acknowledging one Baptism for the remission of sins, affirms its intention of seeking closer relations with every Church with which it stands in fundamental doctrinal agreement, but from which it is separated in matters of government and the ordering of the ministry".

"In its approach to other Churches in which it discerns the one Body of Christ, the Church of Scotland would desire to look beyond the divisions of history to the ultimate fulness and unity of the Church's life in Christ . . .".

Such acknowledgment of denominational incompleteness and inadequacy, along with decision and commitment in regard to seeking reunion, are the vital basis for a creative intercommunion which is on the way to the reintegration of Christendom.

There will still, however, be those who regard intercommunion as part of the *goal* in Christian Unification, and not belonging to the *way* towards that goal. I agree that it is false to regard intercommunion merely in a pragmatic or utilitarian light as a device for promoting better understanding and fellowship between separated Christians. A transcendent Act of God cannot be manipulated as a human instrument. But there does arise a point in interchurch relations when the refusal to receive Christ together in His reconciling Grace is a human resistance to the Divine desire to make us one. Linking the Unity of the Church to the efficacy of Christ's Atonement, Professor Torrance writes: "The bearing of the atoning and incorporating work of Christ to the oneness and to the fulness of the Church insists that the road to the unity of the Church and to the evangelization of the world lies through *intercommunion*, so that all who are baptized into the one Body of Christ may be healed of their dividedness through

Eucharistic Communion and in the reconciliation thereby effectively enacted in their flesh and blood show forth to the whole world the death of Christ until He come ”.

Present Day Context

If there has been any validity in my argument so far, it has revealed the paucity, if not the entire absence, of genuine Biblical and doctrinal reasons against the practice of intercommunion, in an age (and this is important!) of ecumenical effort and the *will* to be One. When separated Communion say, “ We desire under God to be reconciled and to become One ”, the crippling bitterness is removed from the sin of schism, and intercommunion becomes a *divine* demand that *human* theory and pride must be very slow to deny.

Indeed, I should now like to look at four principles which appear to me to require that the churches participating in the ecumenical movement consider as a matter of urgency entering into intercommunion.

The Church and the Churches

Firstly, let us mark the Biblical teaching about “ *the Church* ”, which stands in stark opposition to our modern picture of “ *the churches* ”, which is a picture we too readily take for granted. In the Eucharist, the transcendent reality of Christ’s Broken Body and Shed Blood creates anew “ the Church ” as His Body, that reality for a moment unobscured by the unscriptural and sinful fact of “ the churches ”. It is in the Lord’s Supper that the real *mysterium* of the Church is revealed: the One Christ is the Church’s Eternal Unity, and not even the fearful sin of schism can destroy the Oneness of Christ, and therefore, the Unity of the Church. It is the One Christ Who is present in His One Body in the Eucharist.

“ And He is before all things, and by Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church . . . For it pleased the Father that in Him should all fulness dwell; and, having made peace through the blood of His cross, by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself . . . And you now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in His sight ”.(¹)

(¹) *Colossians I., 17-22.*

To the Church, His Body, the Lord has given the Ministry, the essential ministry which remains subordinate to the Crucified and Risen Lord Who is present in His own Sacrament. The essential ministry of the One Church offering Christ in Word and Sacraments cannot be *wholly* obscured by the unhappy fact that it is visible as the one essential *ordo* of sacerdotium in Romanism; as centred in an Episcopate in Anglicanism; and as the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments in Presbyterianism. The One Ministry of the One Church is only to be met in the inevitably incomplete ministries of "the churches", that unscriptural situation; but Church and Ministry are still real and valid, because Jesus Christ is the Eternal Reality which human sin can never destroy. Because no denomination is "*the Church*," as Christ's One Undivided Body, it might be held that there is never any *complete* Eucharist; and yet it is more true to say that there is never any *incomplete* Eucharist, since it is Christ Himself, the Lord of the Church, Who comes in the Bread and Wine.

The indestructible and indivisible Oneness of the Church grounded in the One Lord Jesus Christ is the real sanction for receiving Him together even in our sinfully divided state, that He may make us One. "For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread".⁽¹⁾ In this matter of intercommunion, we must think more of "the Church" and less of "the churches".

One Baptism

But secondly, intercommunion is grounded in Holy Baptism, and must rest on the New Testament view of Baptism as incorporation into the Body of Christ. We readily accept each others' Christian baptism, and even the Church of Rome only conditionally re-baptizes a convert. Then, are we prepared to recognize a baptized brother or sister as incorporated into the One Atoning Body of the Lord Jesus Christ, and then to say to him or her: "But you may not feed upon the Body and Blood of Christ here where *He* is present unto Whom you are already ingrafted as a member of his One Body"?

Supposed theological orthodoxy in regard to the Eucharist has too often in Christian history displaced baptism as the one Biblical basis of our membership of His

⁽¹⁾ *I. Corinthians X., 17.*

Body. When St. Paul was reminding the Ephesians of their membership in the One Body, filled with the One Spirit and confessing the One God, One Lord, and One Faith, he stressed the One Baptism as the ground of their membership of the Body, a position too often obscured or overlaid. It was in direct development of this New Testament standpoint that the Nicene Creed declares: "I acknowledge *one Baptism* for the remission of sins"; and the Eucharist is not mentioned in the Creed.

Sprinkled with the Atoning Blood of Christ in Holy Baptism, we are one in Him, in spite of our sinful divisions, and we dare not deny that shared reconciling Blood in refusing to accept the unity He creates at His Table.

Intercommunion will come nearer when Christians more gratefully acknowledge the Grace in their baptism. It is, I believe, a moving of the Spirit in the Church, that, in this ecumenical age, the doctrine of Baptism and Christian initiation is being so widely re-thought.

The Lord's Table

Thirdly, I should like to see a greater emphasis on the Eucharist as *the Lord's Table*, rather than as the rite of a church. That is the way forward for us all. Just here, the Reformation is relevant to all the churches, even to Rome in its much altered post-Tridentine garb. At the Reformation the return to the Holy Scriptures as the supreme vehicle of the Word of God gave a new significance and importance to the two sacraments of the Gospel actually instituted by Christ. Baptism and the Lord's Supper were a dominical institution and command. They were held in awe as stemming from the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus. To come to the Eucharist on the first day of the week in New Testament times, was not just to be present at the main act of Christian worship in the home of Aquila and Priscilla or in the Church at Corinth, but to be a partaker of the Lord's Table. The accent on Christ and the Divine Action was kept right.

It is true that I can only come to the Lord's Table today by partaking in a communion service in a particular congregation of some particular denomination; but the central reality is not conditioned by or dependent on the historical and doctrinal *form* in which the mighty act of God reaches me. The Lord is in and over the Church, but the Church does not *possess* the Lord, for the Body

cannot rule the Head. The Table is His, where *He* comes to save and reconcile.

Denominational jurisdiction will always be less self-assured when the *Lord's Supper* and the *Lord's Table* are the matter involved. The communion service of the Church of South India or of the Church of Sweden is much less awful than the reality in and behind such, namely, *the Table of the Lord*. Has not this something pertinent to say about intercommunion ?

The Will to Unity

But there is a particular obedience required in those three principles which must be expressed in a fourth that puts the consideration of intercommunion into a new setting, namely, the Will towards Unity. Intercommunion as an end in itself is disobedience to God's revealed will for His Church. Unwillingness to repent and be reconciled is sinful obstinacy, making us unworthy participants, who at His Table fail to discern the Lord's Body in its reconciling unity.

But where and when churches are seeking the way forward towards Reunion, a new spiritual situation has arisen where intercommunion in penitence and faith may be required by God.

In ecumenical conversation the Archbishop of York, Dr. A. M. Ramsey, notes three points at which intercommunion requires consideration : (i.) when the intention to go forward in discussion of unity has been expressed ; (ii.) when the first steps, for example in mutual adaptation of church structures, have been taken ; and (iii.) only when the churches have been formally united. Few now, in the modern ecumenical context, would wish to delay intercommunion until that third and final position. Some would expect intercommunion to follow some practical steps towards reunion on both sides. But an increasing number of thoughtful Christians in all churches feel a divine compunction to meet at the Lord's Table as soon as the unification of the Church is mutually acknowledged as God's Will, and therefore the road that must be taken.

In the context of a consideration of "the Reformed Churches and the Ecumenical Movement", the 17th General Council of the World Presbyterian Alliance, at Princeton in 1954, came to this finding : "As Reformed and Presbyterian Churches we bear witness to our fellow

Christians that we recognize the ministry, sacraments and membership of all churches, which, according to the Bible, confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. We invite and gladly welcome the members of all such churches to the Table of our common Lord. The Church has received the sacrament of Holy Communion from Christ and He communicates Himself in it to the believer. The Table of the Lord is His, not ours. We believe that we dare not refuse the sacrament to any baptized person who loves and confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. It is our strong conviction that unwillingness, particularly at this time, to practise such intercommunion gravely impedes the cause of unity and lends an air of unreality to much of our talk about it. We cannot proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation without demonstrating at the Table of the Lord that we are reconciled to one another. Therefore, we would welcome face to face talks with our fellow Christians in other churches looking towards the time when all sincere Christians will be welcome round a common Table ”.

I remind you that such a finding was promulgated in a study of the ecumenical movement and in the context of commitment within that movement ; and I repeat that the standpoint can be maintained only on that understanding.

When Christians are humble enough and honest enough to seek reconciliation, in the belief that God waits to unite His Church as He alone can, then they may well feel compelled to await together *at His Table*, the bestowal of His gift of unity. Professor Torrance expresses that same hope in this way : “ The Eucharistic communion does not add anything to the wholeness of Baptismal incorporation, but it is a renewal of the Church’s oneness in the Body of Christ, and such an anticipation of the fulness to come that through it the Church may live out boldly and spiritually in the midst of the broken and divided world the oneness of the Body of Christ ”.

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