

The Place of The Lord's Supper in Evangelical Worship.*

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IT would be difficult to discuss the place of the Lord's Supper in Evangelical worship without first considering the place that it has held in the Christian Church in the past. Next must come a consideration of the demands of present day experience. And finally there must be a review of any practical steps that we can take to ensure that as Evangelicals we give the Holy Communion the place that history and experience show to belong to it. This article therefore falls into three well-defined divisions.

1. The place of the Lord's Supper in the past history of the Christian Church.

There is little in the New Testament that throws light on the forms of Services in the earliest days of the Church. The reading of the Old Testament, prayers, Psalms, and exhortations, evidently formed a large part of any gathering for worship. But in addition there was what is called in the Acts "The Breaking of the Bread," and in Corinthians "The Lord's Supper." There is a tendency to-day to hold that the Lord Jesus did not institute the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and the references in Acts are regarded as references to the common fellowship meals that the early Church carried on as Jesus Himself had conducted them when He was with them. St. Paul, on the other hand, under the influence of what he believed to be a revelation from the Risen Lord, brought into this fellowship meal the special sacramental significance of the bread and the wine that the Church has preserved ever since.

But a careful examination of the use of the phrase "The Breaking of the Bread" in the Acts, shows that there is still something to be said for the older view. It will be noticed that the definite article occurs in Acts ii. 42, "They continued . . . in *the* breaking of *the* bread and the prayers," and again in Acts xx. 11, "When Paul had gone up and had broken *the* bread . . ." The article does not occur in Acts xxvii. 35, where Paul on the ship took bread and brake it, purely to satisfy hunger. Hence it seems that we are justified in drawing a distinction between the special Breaking of the Bread and the ordinary meal when bread was broken. This distinction is probably to be maintained in Acts. ii. 46, "Breaking bread at home," where the article is absent in the Greek. The following words suggest that the reference here is to ordinary meals. One apparent exception is in Acts xx. 7, "When we were gathered together to break bread." There is no article here (contrast verse 11), but the verb "to break" is in the Aorist Infinitive, which may convey the idea of a special service rather than an ordinary meal, since it denotes a single action and not a series of actions that would take place during a meal.

* Originally read as a paper before the West Midlands Evangelical Clergy Union, but slightly rewritten.

Those who hold that the Breaking of Bread is not the same as the Pauline Lord's Supper, stress the point that no mention is made of the Cup in the Acts. But just as the Brethren to-day always call their Morning Service "The Breaking of Bread," so the early Church may have done the same. We always tend to abbreviate a title. The argument would tell equally well against the view that this was a fellowship meal, since the fellowship meal would normally include wine as well, and yet this is not mentioned in the Acts.

In any case there is no trace of any opposition in the Church to St. Paul's teaching, as there would certainly have been if it had been an innovation. And although Matthew and Mark do not record any command by Christ to perpetuate His action with the bread and the wine in remembrance of Him, yet their manner of recording His actions suggests that they were consciously describing the original institution of what was observed in the Church as something more than a fellowship meal.

So, assuming the identity of the Breaking of Bread with the Lord's Supper, we find in Acts ii. 42 that the early Christians "continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread and the prayers." The words imply frequency. In Acts xx. 7 we find the Church at Troas gathered together on the first day of the week to break bread. In 1 Corinthians xi. St. Paul speaks of eating the Lord's Supper "when ye assemble yourselves together," (verse 20), and the whole context suggests that he is dealing with frequent gatherings.

There is no need to labour this point, for it is undeniable that, when we leave the New Testament times and come on to the next stage in the Church's history, the Lord's Supper is an integral part of the Sunday Service. I need not enumerate the references in early Christian writers. One thing however is worthy of special notice. While catechumens could attend the preliminary part of the Service, only the baptized could remain for the actual Communion, and all who remained partook of the Elements. No such thing as non-communicating attendance was ever known, and later, when the practice began, Chrysostom, at the end of the 4th century, spoke in the strongest terms in condemnation of it. (Homily on Ephesians. III). But every baptized Christian, unless he was under excommunication, normally took part in the whole Service, which included the Lord's Supper as an essential part of it. It is not correct to say that the Communion was the central Service, but it was an essential part of the central Service, which was made up of confession, prayer, praise, singing, preaching, and the reception of the Elements.

But, as the centuries go by, the history of the Communion takes a strange turn. An ever increasing veneration of the Elements resulted in an ever diminishing regard for the Communion itself. Mystery and dread replaces sacramental fellowship. The whole balance is shifted from the command of our Lord, "Take, eat!" and "Drink ye all of this!" to the attendance of the worshipper at a ceremony that is completed by others on his behalf. The significant phrase "Hearing Mass," came into use as something distinct from receiving Communion. Finally, the Mediæval Church laid upon Christians the minimum obligation of receiving the Communion once a year. This is still the

rule of the Roman Church, though at least one Pope has expressed the wish that members of the Church should receive Communion far more frequently.

We are accustomed to think of the Reformation from a negative viewpoint as regards the Communion. But one of the tasks that the Reformers set themselves was the restoration of frequent Communion. Their minimum requirements of three times in the year, as laid down in the rubric, are a slight advance on the Roman once a year. But they contemplated a weekly Communion Service wherever possible, and they abolished non-communicating attendance.

A few facts about the views of the Reformers would not be out of place here. Luther wished for a weekly Communion, but gave way before the popular reluctance to communicate frequently. Zwingli was an exception to most of the leading Reformers, in that he advocated a Communion Service no more than four times in the year. Calvin fought strongly for the restoration of the primitive practice of the Lord's Supper as an integral part of each Sunday morning Service, but the Genevan magistrates and people overruled him, and the practice in the Calvinistic Churches became that of Communion three times in the year.

As regards our own Reformers, the general index to all their writings included in the Parker Society volumes shows that a number urged weekly Communion. The Prayer Book rubrics contemplate a weekly Communion for Cathedral clergy, but anticipate that in a Parish there may not always be a sufficient number of parishioners to communicate with the Minister, so that a weekly Ante-Communion may be all that is possible. Probably the situation in England was similar to that on the Continent, and the majority of people continued the practice of infrequent Communion, to which they had grown accustomed under the Church of Rome. But it has been worth while noticing the belief and intention of those spiritually enlightened men who took the lead in the Reformation.

By the middle of the 17th Century the Communion had fallen into considerable neglect, and in many Churches was celebrated only rarely. But, in actual fact, at this time and later the neglect was not solely a neglect of the Communion, but of Church Services as a whole. The High Church party in the 17th century might have brought about a greater respect for the Communion, but it failed in its object, probably because Laud stressed the ritual accompaniments of the Service rather than the reality of the Communion, and these ritual accompaniments suggested ideas of the Service which were not those of the Prayer Book. But about the end of the century Bishop Beveridge of St. Asaph wrote a most helpful tract on "The Necessity and Advantage of Frequent Communion," in which he calls attention to the practice of the primitive Church and the mind of our own Church on this subject.*

Bishop Beveridge says that in his day there were many thousands who had never received the Sacrament at all, and but very few who received it above once or twice a year.

* A large part of this tract was reprinted as No. 26 of the famous "Tracts for the Times". But its doctrine of the Communion is very different from the modern Anglo-Catholic doctrines.

Things became no better in the years that followed. In 1741 Bishop Secker of Oxford urges the clergy in his diocese to have at least one Communion between Whitsuntide and Christmas. In 1800 on Easter Day there were only six communicants in St. Paul's Cathedral.

A new regard for the Holy Communion came in with Wesley, Whitefield, and the Evangelicals. Wesley urged weekly Communion. And in reading the lives of some of the Evangelical stalwarts, we find that they certainly drew people to the Lord's Supper. It was the Evangelicals who encouraged early Communion, though I cannot discover whether the Communion at this time was ever entirely a separate Service. Thomas Scott had his Sunday morning Service at 6 o'clock, with Communion following. Romaine had weekly Communion. Thomas Jones of Creaton in Northamptonshire for years had never less than eighty-five communicants on the first Sunday in the month, that is, the whole adult population of the village. Grimshaw of Haworth found twelve communicants when he came to the parish. After a few years he could tell the Archbishop that in the winter he had 300-400, and in the summer nearly 1200. On one occasion at least in his Church thirty-five bottles of wine were needed for the Communion. These facts show that a revival of love for the Communion began with the Evangelicals before the Oxford movement.

Evening Communion was not started by the Evangelicals, but it was welcomed by them, not because of any doctrinal significance, but, to quote from one of them, because "it has enabled so many to come to that blessed Ordinance who could never come before." Actually Evening Communion was first advocated in 1851, when a Committee in Leeds, under the chairmanship of a High Churchman, Dr. Hook, recommended it on the ground that only in the evening could the humbler classes, with their wives and mothers, easily attend the Service.* The practice rapidly spread, until in 1879 in the London Diocese 262 Churches had it, and in 1881 out of the 291 Churches in the Diocese of Rochester 100 practised it. And it became a regular Service in all Evangelical Churches.

In the meantime the Oxford Movement was exerting its influence in the Church. The early Tractarians were more moderate than their successors. They valued the Communion, but deprecated additional ritual. Pusey and Newman regularly took the Northward Position. Pusey spoke against the introduction of vestments. Keble never adopted vestments, and he always opposed non-communicating attendance. But there has been a steady advance in the Anglo-Catholic viewpoint, until once again we have arrived at what is almost the Roman outlook of a Presence of Christ in the Elements that is independent of the reception of the Elements. Once again we have the unprimitive custom of non-communicating attendance, or hearing Mass, and other Services that centre round the Elements apart from their reception.

This summary would not be complete without a reference to two differences of practice outside our own Church. The Brethren, both Open and Exclusive, have adopted the primitive custom of having the Breaking of Bread every Sunday. They are followed in this by most

* Balleine "History of the Evangelical Party" Chap. ix.

Undenominational groups and by the Pentecostals. The Salvation Army, on the other hand, definitely hold that Christ did not institute a Sacrament to be perpetually observed, but Christians should remember His Death whenever they take food together. The Society of Friends also dispenses with the Sacrament.

This review of the position of the Lord's Supper throughout the history of the Church shows that the early Church practised weekly Communion, and that many earnest Christians since that time have advocated either a weekly Communion or one at frequent intervals. But historical tradition by itself is not conclusive. Something more is needed.

II. The demands of present day experience.

Our present practice as Evangelicals is towards a minimising of the Sacrament. This is probably due to two causes. The first is the reaction against Anglo-Catholicism. Anglo-Catholics magnify the Sacrament; therefore we must minimise it. If we magnify the Sacrament, we shall be suspected of moving towards Rome. This is pardonably human, but may be spiritually disastrous.

The second cause is more important. It arises out of the nature of our spiritual experience. We are conscious of an immediate experience of God and of the blessings of the Gospel, and we cannot see that the Sacraments can give us anything that we do not or cannot obtain without them. As has frequently been pointed out, there are two types of religious experience, which can be described as the Priestly and the Prophetic respectively. We Evangelicals belong to the second, the Prophetic, and stand for immediate contact with God, with no person or thing to be a necessary channel of His grace to us.

Now the human mind loves consistency. When faced with what is apparently inconsistent, we are bewildered, and tend to seize hold of one truth to the exclusion of its apparent opposite. One mind seizes one truth; "The Sacraments are means of grace; hence, if I want the grace, I must find it in the Sacraments." The Evangelical mind seizes the opposite truth; "Faith gives me direct contact with God and Christ, and gives me all the blessings of the Gospel; therefore, as long as I have a living faith, what more can the Sacraments give me?"

There is no doubt that the Evangelical has the easier case to maintain. For it is undeniable that there are really godly Christians who seldom if ever go to the Holy Communion. Many of us have probably found great blessing from the writings and life of Commissioner Brengle of the Salvation Army. He was a man of the deepest holiness, and yet, as a member of the Salvation Army, he would have taken no part in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. A clergyman who does a great deal of speaking in Conferences and Conventions has said on more than one occasion that he has never received any special blessing at the Communion, and he cannot understand how people find help in it.

This quite understandable Evangelical attitude makes it extremely difficult for us to preach about the Communion, or to hold any really helpful doctrine about it. If we are content to tell our people that at the Lord's Table we commemorate the Death of the Lord, (which is perfectly true), they understand and appreciate what we mean, but do

not feel inspired to repeat the commemoration very frequently. In fact there is something to be said for the views of the people of Geneva and of the Scottish Church, that a celebration of the Lord's Supper three or four times in the year is better than a weekly celebration. For the Sacrament is not then a weekly formality, but a serious and solemn occasion for which the whole Church prepares itself. No one who has read "The Doctor" books, by Isabel Cameron, will forget the description of the quarterly Communion. In fact, starting from one aspect of the Communion, it is possible to build up a powerful argument for infrequent Communion, just as the Roman Catholic, starting from another aspect, can build up a powerful argument for Hearing Mass or for the Adoration of the Elements. But if your irrefutable arguments lead you to a conclusion and a practice contrary to the custom of the early Church, the probability is that there is something wrong in the starting-point of your argument.

It may be that our problem as Evangelicals is just another instance of the existence of apparent contraries which cannot be reconciled by precise theory, but only by experience. The old problems of Predestination and Free Will, of our eternal safety in Christ and the possibility of falling away and being lost, are of a similar nature. The champions of each side can build up irrefutable theories, and demonstrate that the views of the other side are untenable. There can be no absolute harmony of the two things from the logical standpoint. Yet I believe that the Christian, who can look on both sides calmly, finds that he can see the possibility of a harmony in the mind of God, and can find a blessed harmony in his own experience.

If I take up this position with regard to the Sacraments, and seek the harmony in experience before I find it in logic, it follows that I cannot expound a theory of the Sacraments that is completely logical. I cannot, for example, say how I can be saved through faith alone, and yet saved by Baptism. I cannot say how I can feed fully on Christ by faith without the Communion, and yet need the Communion to feed fully upon Him. If this sounds illogical, I believe it is a New Testament illogicality or paradox. If however I am forced to decide definitely for one side or the other, abandoning the apparent inconsistency, then I am bound to take the side of faith as against the Sacraments. And this is what our Church of England does also, in its rubric in the Service for the Communion of the Sick. Where the sick man cannot obtain the Sacrament, by true repentance and faith and thanksgiving "he doth eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ profitably to his Soul's health, although he do not receive the Sacrament with his mouth."

We are not however concerned with sick people who cannot receive the Sacrament, but with healthy people who can. What should the Lord's Supper mean to them? Is it merely a proclamation of an already existing union with Christ, or is it the receiving of something that is not normally received by other means? Only if the second thing is true can we urge people to come more frequently to the Lord's Supper.

To me the key to the meaning of the Lord's Supper is the realisation that the Cross in all its aspects is vital to the development of the Christian life, and that the Communion is the reception of Christ

crucified. The whole symbolism of the Service speaks of death. To bring in a primary reference to the Incarnation or to the Ascended Christ is to miss the symbolism. The Bread and the Wine are Christ as He was once, giving His flesh and His blood for our salvation. They are not Christ as He is now. Hence the question of any Presence in the actual Elements does not arise. At the original institution the Elements stood for something that was future; now they stand for something that is past; past, but timeless. And my Christian development depends upon my present reception and apprehension of the timeless Cross.

The reception of the Elements should be a fresh reception of the Cross, or of Christ crucified. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" (I Cor. x. 16). Here at the Lord's Table the reality and inner meaning of the Cross may unfold itself more deeply than ever it does even in our quiet times. Here faith is stimulated to grasp greater heights than it normally comprehends elsewhere. Faith cannot create what is not there. But faith alone can see what is there, namely the perennial freshness of Calvary for me. I may receive the reality as certainly as I receive the symbols.

Now if all this is true, we can see how we may miss the blessing of the Holy Communion simply because we are not prepared to receive it. The unbeliever naturally receives no blessing. But even the believer may be unprepared. It may be our faith that is deficient. Then the bread and the wine are no more than symbols. It may be our hearts that are unprepared. We eat and drink unworthily, bringing our sins casually to Calvary as though Christ's death were no concern of ours; and so we are guilty of the body and blood of Christ, and we do not discern the Lord's body; the bread and the wine are barely even symbols. (I Cor. xi. 27-29). But when we come with sincerely repentant hearts, and faith irradiates the Elements, then we receive not the symbols only, but the reality. All the blessings of the Cross are implanted in us, and through the gateway of the Cross we find ourselves linked to Christ on the throne, and Christ dwelling within, as we "feed on Him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving."

If the Communion means this, then let it be frequent. We strive to make Christian people realise the meaning of the Cross, and perhaps the Communion is a means that we have neglected to advocate. This brings us to the third division of our subject. Here I write under a disadvantage, since I am not in Parish work, and only those who are can be competent to speak.

III. How can our people be encouraged to make a fuller use of this means of grace?

It will perhaps be best to summarise a few points.

a. We must teach a positive doctrine of the Holy Communion, and, whilst we warn those who are not true Christians of the danger of attending a ceremony which is meaningless for them, we must encourage sincere believers to look for a special blessing at the Lord's Table.

b. There should be at least one Communion Service every Sunday. If the conditions of the Parish demand it, there should be two. The

Vicar will naturally study the wishes and conditions of his people in fixing the most suitable times.

c. A great difficulty is the length of the whole Service when Communion follows Morning or Evening Prayer. We have to accept the fact that the majority of people to-day do not like long Services, and will not stay to the Communion after a Service of normal length. At present, of course, we have no legal right to curtail the Services, however much the people desire it. But in practice many Churches do shorten either the Morning or Evening Prayer, or else the Communion itself. Once the Service is to be shortened at all, it seems to me to be immaterial which of the Services is abbreviated, as long as there remains the primitive form of Service with Confession, Scripture, Psalms or Hymns, Preaching and the Lord's Supper.

d. But since nothing of this sort will conquer the reluctance of many of the congregation to come to the Communion, I should propose two or three big Communion Services in the course of the year. On these occasions the Communion would definitely be made central, and the whole congregation would be encouraged to take part. One special value in a Service of this kind would be the realisation of another aspect of the Communion that I have not dwelt upon, namely the Fellowship aspect, when all unite in the one meal. "We being many are one loaf, and one body : for we are all partakers of that one loaf." (I Cor. x. 17. R.V. margin).

e. Finally, all these plans will be more or less useless unless we conduct the Service in a reverent and helpful manner. Like all the other Services, this Service demands our very best. Slovenly reading and theatrical tricks of elocution must alike be avoided. Natural and unhurried simplicity must direct the heart and mind and faith of the worshippers to our Lord Jesus Christ and His Sacrifice. We do not discharge our duty as Ministers simply by delivering the bread and wine to the people. The Lord's Supper from the night of its institution has been a blend of the Word and the Thing. The Elements are the Thing : and with them goes the Word proclaimed and read and sent up in prayer to God. It is for us to make the Word a living reality that the Thing also may become really living.