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Paper #1

Intimacy and Faith: Cranmer's Concept of "Communion" in the 1552 Eucharistic Rite

To write an essay on the communion rite of the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer* is to step onto ground that is already well trod. As Luke the evangelist might put it, many have already taken it in hand to write about those things that were accomplished during the reign of King Edward VI. The historiography of Thomas Cranmer's reforming agenda has come to a general consensus over the past several decades: against an idealizing and wishful Anglo-Catholic viewpoint that sought to minimize the English Reformation's break from the medieval past, contemporary scholars tend to affirm that Cranmer intended to move the Church of England toward his own Zwinglian eucharistic piety and that the 1548 and 1549 communion orders were strategically planned stages in a stepped journey toward 1552.¹ I agree with this assessment, and so unlike Luke—who chose to add an entirely new gospel to those already written—I have a more modest goal. I seek to reflect on the theological concept of communion that lies, I believe, at the heart of Cranmer's eucharistic revision: so much so, indeed, that it became the name of the rite itself. The 1552 "Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion"

¹ For example, R. T. Beckwith, "Thomas Cranmer and the Prayer Book," in *The Study of Liturgy*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 70–74; Colin Ogilvie Buchanan, *What Did Cranmer Think He Was Doing?*, 2nd ed, Grove Liturgical Study 7 (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1982); Diarmaid MacCulloch, "The Myth of the English Reformation," *Journal of British Studies* 30, no. 1 (January 1, 1991): 1–19; Gordon Jeanes, "Cranmer and Common Prayer," in *The Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer: a Worldwide Survey*, ed. Charles Hefling and Cynthia Shattuck (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 21–38.

reflects Cranmer's emphasis on the faithful, prepared believer's intimate personal encounter with Christ. This personal encounter requires no consecration, but only faith. It is a spiritual and interior encounter, though as such it can be described in lavishly realistic terms. It is a largely individual encounter, though it has communitarian implications. Thus for Cranmer the "communion" of the faithful Christian with his or her Lord has moved from being a *moment* in the eucharistic liturgy to its very *raison d'être*.

What's in a Name? Communion as Title for a Rite

To say that "communion" is central to Cranmer's eucharistic theology may at first seem tautological—yet this is a testament to the success that Cranmer's reshaping of English eucharistic piety has had over the past 450 years. Today "Holy Communion" is a familiar name for the eucharistic rite. Only since the height of the liturgical renewal movement of the mid-twentieth century has the Greek word "eucharist" replaced it in many Anglican prayer books. "Communion" still functions as a common synonym in both Anglican and ecumenical parlance; and when the parlance of the free-church traditions, which have been slower to adopt "eucharist," is taken into account, "communion" probably remains the single most widely used term for the rite among English-speaking Christians. Thus it is critical to note that in the Sarum mass, and in medieval usage in general, the word "communion" refers only to the *reception* of the elements: a single liturgical moment taking place within—or indeed often outside—the broader framework of the eucharistic liturgy.² This is still the sense of the word in Cranmer's 1548 *Order for Communion*; indeed this 1548 rite serves as a rite of distribution of the elements to be inserted into the Latin mass.

² Brian Cummings, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 696.

The title of the rite in the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* suggests the same interpretation: the liturgy is called “The Supper of the Lord, and the Holy Communion, commonly called the Mass.” The word *and* suggests that there is still some distinction between the name of the overall liturgy (the Supper of the Lord, and perhaps the Mass) and the Holy Communion as the moment of distribution. Yet the page headings printed in 1549 begin to introduce a certain ambiguity, as “The Communion” is used as the short title throughout the whole service. Thus the 1549 book for the first time suggests that the name “Communion” might apply to the rest of the rite—readings, homily, prayers, etc.

The 1552 book resolves this ambiguity: the service is now titled “The Order for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper, or Holy Communion.” Commentators universally note the disappearance of “the Mass,” but equally significant is the change in conjunction from *and* to *or*. The communion with Christ through the faithful reception of bread and wine, once seen as a moment within a wider liturgical act, is now treated as the title for the entire service and thus identified by implication as its central purpose.

Thus it is no accident that, as Colin Buchanan notes, the structure of the 1552 liturgy has only a single ritual high point: the moment of communion. No longer is there any real “consecration” as a competing focus, thanks to Cranmer’s adaptation of what had once been the canon. Rather, the liturgy serves as a “didactic and devotional approach to the table”: everything leads to the climactic moment at which the elements are distributed.³

In Your Heart, by Faith

What the believer finds in this distribution according to the language of the 1552 rite is an intimate spiritual encounter with Christ. This encounter is framed in the language of eating and

³ Buchanan, *What Did Cranmer Think He Was Doing?*, 23.

drinking, and it is temporally connected with the moment of reception, yet it is essentially an interior act: “Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your heart by faith with thanksgiving.”⁴ Indeed, the connection with the physical reception of the gifts is normative but not required. In the case of the visitation of the sick, the priest is to assure a patient who cannot receive the sacrament by mouth that he or she “doth eat and drink the body and blood of our savior Christ” by repenting of sin, believing in Christ’s work of redemption, and offering thanks.⁵ This spiritual communion without physical reception has precedent in the medieval tradition, but the language of this rubric is that of sixteenth-century evangelicalism. It is noteworthy that the word “spiritually,” which appeared in the corresponding rubric in 1549, has been removed: the effect is to remove any distinction between what happens here and what happens in the normative experience of communion.

Thus the connection between the spiritual eating and drinking of Christ’s body and blood and the physical eating and drinking of bread and wine is for Cranmer a somewhat incidental one: what matters is the faith with which one receives, not the reception of the material elements themselves. With that granted, however, Cranmer is willing to use richly evocative and realistic language to describe that spiritual eating and drinking.⁶ Thus in the prayer of humble access the faithful (through the priest) ask “so to eat the flesh of thy dear son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood.”⁷ Similarly, the exhortation required at every communion service insists that “the benefit is great, if with a truly penitent heart and lively faith we receive that holy

⁴ Joseph Ketley, ed., *The Two Liturgies, A.D. 1549 and A.D. 1552, with Other Documents Set Forth by Authority in the Reign of King Edward VI: Viz. the Order of Communion, 1548, the Primer, 1553, the Catechism and Articles, 1553, Catechismus Brevis, 1553*, Parker Society 29 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1844), 279.

⁵ Ketley, *The Two Liturgies*, 317.

⁶ See Buchanan, *What Did Cranmer Think He Was Doing?*, 6.

⁷ Ketley, *The Two Liturgies*, 278–79. While the deletion of the 1549 phrase “in these holy mysteries” loosens the connection with physical reception, it hardly diminishes the lavish imagery of intimate feeding.

sacrament (for then we spiritually eat the flesh of Christ and drink his blood, then we dwell in Christ and Christ in us, we be one with Christ, and Christ with us).”⁸

An Individual Encounter with Ethical Implications

The interior nature of the eating and drinking of Christ in this liturgy lends itself to a primarily individual understanding of communion. Cranmer is not unconcerned with the communal dimension of liturgy: his Reformed abhorrence of private masses leads to the prohibition of celebrations “except there be a good number to communicate with the priest,” at least three or four even in a small parish.⁹ But this has more to do with the desire to increase communions in general, and to destroy the idea of the mass as a sacrificial work offered by the priest, than with an emphasis on communion as a fundamentally corporate act. What the text of the rite emphasizes is rather the need for personal faith, self-examination, and penitence. The Ten Commandments at the beginning of the service and the exhortations after the offertory highlight individual repentance: particularly noteworthy is Cranmer’s exegesis of 1 Cor. 11:27 in the required exhortation. Here failure to discern the Lord’s body is connected not (of course) with any real presence in the gifts, nor (more surprisingly, at least to modern Christians) with the ecclesial body of Christ, but with the failure to repent of personal sins: blasphemy, opposing God’s word, adultery, malice, or envy.¹⁰

All these sins have a communal dimension, of course, and Cranmer is not unmindful of this. The exhortation goes on to call upon believers to “amend your lives, and be in perfect charity with all men: so shall ye be meet partakers of those holy mysteries.”¹¹ Similarly, the

⁸ Ketley, *The Two Liturgies*, 274.

⁹ Ketley, *The Two Liturgies*, 282.

¹⁰ Ketley, *The Two Liturgies*, 274.

¹¹ Ketley, *The Two Liturgies*, 275.

disciplinary rubrics at the beginning of the service insist on excommunicating those who offend the congregation by living in “open and notorious” sin or who show “malice and hatred” toward one another.¹² The corporate dimension of the communion service is certainly implied by the architectural arrangement of 1552 which envisions communicants gathered around a central wooden table.¹³ And the postcommunion thanksgiving is noteworthy in using Paul’s image of the church as the Body of Christ: communicants are “very members incorporate in thy mystical body, which is the blessed company of all faithful people.”¹⁴

Yet this invocation of New Testament language of the church as Christ’s body is the exception rather than the rule. Besides this one occurrence in the prayer of thanksgiving, nowhere else does such a theologically grounded statement of ecclesial identity appear. More characteristic is the prayer for the whole state of Christ’s church militant, which asks “that all they that do confess thy holy name, may agree in the truth of thy holy word, and live in unity and godly love.”¹⁵ Here church unity seems to be pictured less as a God-given state of mutual interdependence than as the product of agreement and affection among like-minded individuals. The offertory sentences are likewise couched in terms of personal choice: they focus on motivating the individual to generosity rather than on creating a sense of corporate identity.¹⁶ Even the first (optional) exhortation, which calls on believers to “receive the Communion together” and not to look on while others communicate, is framed in terms of the insult to Christ as banquet host rather than to the church as corporate body.¹⁷

¹² Ketley, *The Two Liturgies*, 265.

¹³ Ketley, *The Two Liturgies*, 265.

¹⁴ Ketley, *The Two Liturgies*, 280.

¹⁵ Ketley, *The Two Liturgies*, 271.

¹⁶ Ketley, *The Two Liturgies*, 269–270.

¹⁷ Ketley, *The Two Liturgies*, 271–73.

It is worth considering this view of the church in relationship to two elements of the cultural and theological context. First, the 1552 rite reflects an understanding of the church as coterminous with English civil society—a situation shared with that of medieval Catholicism, which displays a similar tendency toward individual penitence and piety. In the Christendom of sixteenth-century Europe—Catholic and Protestant alike—the church is less a community called out from the world than a big-tent society of saints and sinners into which one is born.¹⁸ Second, however, the 1552 rite is influenced by a specifically Reformed understanding of the church as the invisible body of the faithful rather than the visible church marked by sacraments. For Cranmer sacraments avail only for the elect.¹⁹ Thus it is almost axiomatic that some of those who participate in the church's rites are not true Christians; for these, though they may participate in the rite outwardly, "the receiving of the holy Communion doth nothing else, but increase [their] damnation."²⁰

Medieval Catholicism had allowed at least a guarded optimism about the eventual salvation (through purgatory) of any given baptized person, and thus its liturgy was able to function in some sense as an icon of the fellowship of the redeemed. Even if in practice the liturgy had often served more to reinforce social hierarchy than to subvert it, elements such as the kissing of the pax-brede had at least made a gesture toward social integration and community identity.²¹ In the 1552 rite's ritual simplicity, on the other hand, it demonstrates an urge toward egalitarianism but also a movement away from imaging the gathered congregation as a visible expression of Christ's church. Thus not only the sacramental body of Christ but also the ecclesial

¹⁸ This is not to say that the concept of a Christian society was identical in Catholic and Protestant understandings, of course. The English "godly prince," supreme over both realms, makes the identity between church and civil society an even tighter one.

¹⁹ Jeanes, "Cranmer and Common Prayer," 30–31.

²⁰ Ketley, *The Two Liturgies*, 274.

²¹ John Bossy, "The Mass as a Social Institution 1200-1700," *Past and Present* 100 (1983): 29–61. Miri Rubin notes that real liturgies never functioned in exactly the ideal way Bossy's article might suggest: *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 4.

body of Christ is an interior, spiritual entity not necessarily linked to its physical representation. The “communion” of 1552 is not primarily *koinonia* among the baptized, but *koinonia* of the elect believer with his or her Lord; and while such *koinonia* with Christ will inevitably have implications for the believer’s social life, these are primarily conceptualized as good works flowing from his or her regenerate identity rather than as directly connected to the act of mutual eating and drinking at Christ’s table.

Conclusions

The 1552 rite reflects Cranmer’s concern with elevating the faithful Christian’s spiritual encounter with the risen Christ to the very heart of the eucharistic liturgy. In its shape, which seeks to lead believers along a devotional path to the single ritual high point of reception; in its emphasis on personal holiness and individual self-examination and its intimate language of feeding on Christ; and, not least, in its title, which conflates the moment of distribution with the entirety of the liturgy, it demonstrates the centrality of the concept of *communion* to Cranmer’s theology. This was central to his agenda, not only for the liturgy but indeed for the entire Christian life of all of England: no longer were English lay women and men to be second-order recipients of a sacramental system administered by clergy. Instead, Cranmer sought to bring the English laity to a lively, personal, saving faith: a faith that would be strengthened week by week in the intimate encounter with Jesus through the act of communion.

Cranmer’s ambitious vision fell short to the extent that weekly communion never became a reality for the vast majority of Reformation-era English Christians. Yet it was also in large part successful. For four hundred years “Holy Communion” has served as the official prayer book title for the eucharistic liturgy, and as noted above, it probably remains the most commonly and

ecumenically accepted English-language term for this Christian rite. And, without a doubt, the revision that took place under Cranmer shifted the center of gravity in Anglicans' understanding of the eucharistic liturgy decisively toward communion as the Christian's encounter with his or her Lord. If the high-church Anglicans of the seventeenth century reintroduced the notion of consecration as an official Anglican position, this did not dislodge the importance of reception in Anglican eucharistic piety. Even when communion has been celebrated infrequently, its reception has tended to remain a spiritual center of gravity for Anglicans; certainly more so than in other Calvinist-influenced traditions. The Oxford and Cambridge movements increased the frequency of celebration, and while some parishes in this tradition reintroduced non-communicating masses, this never became the Anglican mainstream. Then, with the liturgical movement of the twentieth century, Cranmer's vision of weekly general communion finally became a reality.

Of course, Cranmer would not recognize much Anglican eucharistic piety today. He would be alarmed by the wide acceptance of a real presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine, and by the triumph of eucharistic prayers emphasizing the consecration of those elements, to a degree unimaginable even in 1662. He might be intrigued by today's greater emphasis on the church as corporate, though he would probably deplore our reduced emphasis on personal holiness and preparation and would be uncomfortable with our sacramental realism about the ecclesial body just as much as about the eucharistic body. Yet he would find himself wholly aligned with the liturgical movement's priorities of intelligibility and the use of the vernacular.

What he would find most recognizable, I think—at least from his fervent hopes if not from his experience—is the way in which weekly communion functions for countless ordinary

Christians as an experience of intimate personal encounter with Jesus Christ and the central moment of the Sunday liturgy. This is perhaps Cranmer's most permanent legacy as the architect of the 1552 prayer book and of its 1548 and 1549 predecessors: to have set communion at the heart of the Sunday liturgy in a way that has endured.