

## HOLY COMMUNION IN THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

(A talk given to a group of Anglicans and Presbyterians)

My former co-presbyter in Aberdeen, the late Dr. Wilson Baird, used to say that the Westminster Confession had a less ambiguous statement of the real presence of our Lord in the Sacrament than that found in the Thirty-nine Articles. 'Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this sacrament, do then also inwardly by faith, *really and indeed*, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death: the body and blood of Christ being then not corporally or carnally in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet as *really*, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.'<sup>1</sup> The Thirty-nine Articles do not include the word 'really' twice repeated in the Presbyterian document. What is more significant is that the three greatest books written by ministers of the Church of Scotland about the sacraments have affinities to the tradition that is commonly labelled 'High' or 'Catholic' in the Church of England. I refer to Robert Bruce's *Sermons on the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper*,<sup>2</sup> written within forty years of the Reformation, H. J. Wotherspoon's *Religious Values in the Sacraments*<sup>3</sup> and D. M. Baillie's *Theology of the Sacraments*,<sup>4</sup> both written in our own century. It would be wrong to suggest that these books, however sound they appear to some of us, are typical of Presbyterian thought in the last four centuries. A truer indication of the common Presbyterian attitude is that given by the late Sir Thomas Taylor, an outstanding and most scholarly elder of the Church, when he wrote, 'To the Protestant sacraments are signs in which the promises of God are visibly represented and confirmed as a seal confirms a document, but they are not necessary to salvation. . . . Protestants see in this (the Lord's Supper) an ordinance instituted by our Lord which commemorates, confirms and, as it were, seals to the believing heart the sacrifice made on Calvary once and for all.'<sup>5</sup> Notice where Taylor's statement comes short of that in the Shorter Catechism, which affirms that in the sacraments. 'Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed and applied to believers.'<sup>6</sup> What is connoted by the verb 'applied' is explained in the statement in the Larger Catechism, 'They that worthily communicate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, do therein feed upon the body and blood of Christ, not after a corporal

and carnal, but in a spiritual manner; yet truly and really, while by faith they receive and apply unto themselves Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death.'<sup>7</sup> Taylor does not mention this effective application at all, and even qualifies the sealing aspect of the sacrament with the words 'as it were'. He goes on to repudiate in terms so blunt that they might have come from the sixteenth century, the sacrifice of the Mass, which elsewhere he castigated as having no warrant in Scripture, as being false in fact and idolatrous both in principle and in practice.<sup>8</sup> Taylor was, I believe, expressing the prevalent Presbyterian view of both clergy and educated laity, particularly in his wholly negative attitude to the Roman Mass.

The emphasis in our standards that the real presence is a presence to faith has caused misunderstanding both among ourselves and to other people. We are apt to think that what is meant by faith is that 'somehow we conjure up the divine presence by believing in it, or that we produce the faith out of our own resources, and that, in response to our faith God gives us His presence'<sup>9</sup> The traditional Scottish practices of heart-searching self-examination before communicating, of several preparatory services before the actual celebration, of the close linking of the Sacrament with the preaching of the Word, and of the emotional excitement of a great spiritual occasion have in the past all tended to draw attention to the state of mind of the worshipper, and particularly to his need of faith. In common thought faith has often been regarded merely subjectively as a conscious attitude of trust or, worse still in the fashion of the Platonists, as an inferior substitute for true knowledge, but of course much more pious than the real thing! Robert Bruce was expressing the true Protestant doctrine when he saw faith as objectively as he saw his own mouth. Faith is the mouth of the soul,<sup>10</sup> and just as really as we receive the bread through our mouths into our physical bodies, so really we receive Christ crucified through faith into our souls. 'As soon as thou receivest that bread in thy mouth . . . as soon thou receivest the body of Christ in thy soul, and that by faith.'<sup>11</sup> Presence to faith is not less real presence than mere spatial proximity. May I use a poor analogy? A casual caller is physically present in a man's home, but certainly not in the way that the man's own wife is present, for it is largely her presence that makes the home a home. One reason for this is that the wife is present to her husband's faith and love (and it is a mutual faith and love). Take away that faith and love, and the wife becomes a casual occupant no longer a 'real presence'. To work up an effect in the sphere of feeling and emotion is as inappropriate in the Sacrament as it would be hypocritical in the home. The great thing about any man's home is that his wife is really there, however often he may forget about her, and the great thing about the Lord's Supper is that our Lord is really there. It is

a great pity that one of the deepest insights of biblical theology today, that of the genuine objectivity of faith, is being disallowed by so much trivial and carping criticism. The emphasis on the place of faith in the Sacrament has never meant that the genuinely devout have doubted the reality of Christ's real presence there. 'Here, O my Lord, I see Thee face to face' is how one Scottish hymn-writer describes his experience at Communion in stronger terms than most theologians would use.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes Scottish Presbyterians have been superstitiously afraid of that awful presence. An old shepherd who was in church almost every Sunday said to me, when I falteringly urged him to come to the Lord's Table, 'I'm safer as I am'. It was of a very real presence that he was afraid.

In what characteristic respects have our Presbyterian thought about and our observance of Communion been most true to the mind of Christ?

(1) First there has been the place given to the Word – the 'action' sermon as it used to be called, as an integral part of the celebration. Bruce makes three points here. (a) We get no new thing in the Sacrament, nothing other than we get in the Word, for Christ himself comes to us in the Word. To deny this would be to contradict our high Presbyterian view of preaching. (b) What we get in the Word, we get more fully and better in the Sacrament – 'a better grip of Christ', as Bruce puts it.<sup>13</sup> The Sacrament is not an appendix to the Word, as Calvin once suggested in an unfortunate phrase,<sup>14</sup> but the fulfilment and consummation of the Word – dare I say it? – the Word made flesh! (c) Bruce speaks much of the Sacrament as the seal or confirmation of the Word, and so the Word has a necessary place in its celebration. He compares the Sacrament to the seal attached to a document; if the document is blank without words, the seal avails nothing; we do not know what is being sealed.<sup>15</sup> Bruce makes the interesting point that the Romans too realize that the Word is essential, but that they limit it to the Words, 'Hoc est enim corpus meum'. For Bruce the effective word is not this single phrase but the whole Gospel in its fulness.<sup>16</sup> I believe that experience confirms the wisdom of this integration of Word and Sacrament. It is significant that the only places where the Book of Common Prayer enjoins a sermon are at Communion and Ordination. A Sacrament without the Word can, in human hands, easily degenerate into magic. Incidentally this is probably one reason why our Presbyterian standards are so definite that only ordained ministers should administer both sacraments. This insistence is not chiefly due to any priestly conception of the ministry but to the belief that he who administers the Sacrament must at the same time preach the Word.

(2) Our Presbyterian practice has sought to give expression to the communion of believers with one another at the Lord's Supper,

to the fact, as St. Paul puts it, that 'we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the same loaf' (I Cor. 10:17). This is seen not only in the continued custom of communicants sitting together, and passing the bread and often the cup the one to the other. It was much more evident in the celebration as I knew it in my boyhood where not only was the cup common to all but the bread was visibly one loaf so prepared that each participant could readily break off a morsel, and communicants all sat together around a single table. I rejoice to see a revival of this last custom in some of our newer churches. One has to admit, alas, that in many of our churches this symbolism of unity has been lost through the use of the individual cup, and shame keeps me silent about some of the deviations in ritual to which this occasionally leads.

(3) In its traditional form our Scottish Communion service fulfilled in an outstanding way the purpose of 'showing forth the Lord's death till he come'. The old communion season extending from Thursday (the Fast Day) to Monday had some resemblances to a modern parish mission, and it was customary for even rather indifferent adherents to be witnesses of the Sacrament, although many stayed away from the Table from a sense of unworthiness or from sheer superstition. Those present – and I certainly did so as a boy – realized that 'Jesus Christ was being openly set forth, crucified among' us. The custom of children, and of non-communicants generally being present at the celebration of Communion has disappeared in most parts of Scotland to their great loss, but in many rural churches still the Communion has the witnessing power of a great occasion.

(4) One of the happy things about our Scottish celebration is the open invitation to members of any branch of the Christian Church to join with us in Communion. This is a surprising development because our forbears were very strict in examining the doctrinal knowledge as well as the ordinary conduct of those desiring admission to the Table, and they might have been expected to warn off members of denominations with what they certainly regarded as somewhat heretical beliefs. But our forefathers seem almost unconsciously to have come to the realization that the Table was the Lord's and not their own, and that all who truly acknowledged him (and their acceptance of the Bible and the historic creeds was enough evidence of the reality of their acknowledgment), have as good a right to be there as those within the Presbyterian fold. It is not, as critics sometimes unfairly suggest, that we wish to use inter-communion as a means to unity; it is rather the acknowledgment that there is already unity in essential beliefs and a humble recognition that in lesser matters others may be as loyal as we are to what is believed to be the truth, or even more so.

Yet there are aspects in which our Presbyterian doctrine and practice have differed from those of other parts of the Catholic Church, and where we may well have much to learn from others.

(1) There has undoubtedly been among us a tendency to 'subjectivism' in sacramental devotion – primarily a reaction from the cruder *opus operatum* of much Romanist teaching. Yet one should not undervalue the conscious, emotionally charged experience of Christ's presence and grace, for it is often a thoroughly genuine experience – an experience of an objective presence. I have already suggested that what may be wrong in us here springs from a misunderstanding of faith.

(2) The element of sacrifice has been often ignored in our Presbyterian thinking. The very word 'sacrifice' in connection with the Communion is, like the word 'bishop', one so heavily charged with emotional overtones of sixteenth-century hostility to the Roman 'sacrifice of the Mass' that many of us prefer to keep it out of our minds rather than to think honestly what it means. There is, as Dr. Boyd of Madras once said 'a deliberate avoidance of anything that might seem to imply that Christ, or the sacrifice of Christ is being once more offered to the Father'. Yet, as Donald Baillie pointed out, the notions of sacrifice and oblation have always had some place in our sacramental doctrine and practice.<sup>17</sup> The Reformers were clear that the Lord's Supper did represent, seal and apply the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. Those devotional writers and preachers, who think more of the Upper Room than of Calvary, and those who in their emphasis on communion with the living Christ forget that he is Christ crucified, are getting away from the heart of the Sacrament. Again we have always maintained that Holy Communion is a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving – a Eucharist, although that is a word we seldom use in Scotland. And the response to what we receive has always been that 'we offer and present ourselves, our souls and bodies to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice'. Those who hold that Holy Communion is essentially a sacrifice will not be content with our limiting the word to these sacrificial elements. Baillie indeed goes further by maintaining that Presbyterians have always held that, whenever we make a true offering to God, whether it be of our prayers, our gifts, our thanksgivings or ourselves, we only make it rightly, if in some sense we make it in Christ, as found in him, as members of his body.<sup>18</sup> Thus we pray in the words of Bright's communion hymn, 'And only look on us as found in him'. This surely means that in the act of Communion we are sharing in 'the one true, pure, immortal sacrifice' made on Calvary. As William Milligan, the Presbyterian grandfather of the last Bishop of Edinburgh, put it, Christ's sacrifice 'possesses the power of a present offering',<sup>19</sup> and this power is there, for Christ himself is there as we celebrate the Sacrament.

(3) I should like to make almost the same point in another way. In the Catholic tradition there are two stages in observing the Sacrament – the Consecration or Commemoration and the Communion, which Wotherspoon described as respectively the sharing of Christ's death and the receiving of his nourishing gifts.<sup>20</sup> We approach God through Christ crucified in the Consecration, and He comes to us through Christ in the Communion. It would be fair, I think, to say that, while the Roman Mass gives a larger place to the Consecration our Presbyterian service gives a larger place to the Communion, and we have probably something to learn from the Roman practice here. Still the orders of service in both the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *Book of Common Order* rightly indicate that throughout the rite the initiative is with God, and that the offering of ourselves in and through Christ is a response to what God has done for us.

(4) The general infrequency of our Presbyterian Communion seems scandalous to many both inside and outside our denominations, and, frankly, I think we have fallen between two stools in this matter. There was much to be said for the old annual or quarterly celebrations, provided that they were great and well-prepared-for occasions after the fashion of the great annual festivals of Judaism. There is much to be said also for the weekly or even more frequent celebration that the Reformers advocated when each Communion is a preparation for the next. There is very little to be said for infrequent celebrations with neither preparatory services nor the other accompaniments of a great festival, and this is still the most common practice in Presbyterian Scotland.

(5) There is one abuse that should be mentioned for many of us feel strongly about it. It is our use of Holy Communion as a means for preparing congregational rolls. It appears wrong in principle to use a sacrament as a means to an administrative end, however necessary that end may be. In practice the partaking of Communion merely in order to keep one's name on the congregational roll, as I am afraid sometimes happens, can only be regarded as akin to blasphemy.

I shall end with two comments. (1) I do not see that there is anything in either the Anglican or Presbyterian teaching on Communion, taken apart from our respective doctrines of the ministry, to prevent real unity. I certainly could accept the sacramental teachings of the Thirty-nine Articles as fully as I can those of our Presbyterian Confession of Faith, and at least some of the things which I have said rather critical of our Presbyterian practice would have had near equivalents if I had been examining the practice of the Church of England. (2) I believe that we both, and all the other churches, have still much to learn and receive of what Christ wishes

to give us in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. I suggest that we are more likely to receive what is lacking not by looking to Roman or even patristic theology, as the Catholic movements of last century in both our Churches tended to do, but in looking to the theology of the Bible itself. We shall certainly find the truth there if we dig deeply enough.

## NOTES

1. Chap. XXIX, sec. vii.
2. Wodrow Society Edition (Edinburgh, 1843).
3. Croall Lectures (Edinburgh, 1928).
4. London, 1957.
5. T. M. Taylor, *Where One Man Stands* (Edinburgh, 1960), p. 92.
6. Answer 92.
7. Answer 170.
8. *The Heritage of the Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1960), p. 5.
9. D. M. Baillie, op. cit., p. 101.
10. R. Bruce, op. cit., pp. 14, 47.
11. R. Bruce, op. cit., p. 10.
12. Andrew Bonar, in *Church Hymnary 3*, no. 573.
13. R. Bruce, op. cit., p. 28.
14. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chap. XIV, sec. 3.
15. R. Bruce, op. cit., pp. 29f.
16. R. Bruce, op. cit., pp. 80f.
17. D. M. Baillie, op. cit., pp. 108-24.
18. D. M. Baillie, op. cit., pp. 116f.
19. Quoted by D. M. Baillie, op. cit., p. 117.
20. H. J. Wotherspoon, op. cit., pp. 247-9.

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