



Holy Communion, a sign and seal of salvation

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It is a fact that the New Testament never applies the Greek word *mustarion* (Latin *mysterion*) sacrament, or mystery, to Baptism or Holy Communion. Mystery belongs to the nature of Christ who is God and Man in one person. We can know that Christ is both God and Man but we cannot understand how he is both. We cannot understand it but recognise his reality as God and Man and accept it as the foundation of our faith. In a secondary but legitimate sense we speak of Baptism and Holy Communion as sacraments. For Christ is not only the agent of our salvation but in his Person and atoning work he is their substance.

Holy Communion and Baptism are not sacraments in themselves, in their own right apart from the Word of God. The Word of God and the sacraments belong together. The one is the ‘spoken Word’ and the other, the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, are ‘the visible Word’. Word and sacraments belong together. The language used in the New Testament about Baptism ‘is interchangeable with that it uses about the Eucharist. Indeed Baptism and Eucharist are just as parallel, and just as one, as *in Christ* and *Christ in us*. If anything, the emphasis is laid upon Baptism, as in the confession of unity [...], “One Lord, one faith, one Baptism”, where the Eucharist is not mentioned’.¹

In the spoken Word, we hear Christ speaking and his saving work proclaimed. We hear Christ giving himself to be our Saviour and we are asked in faith to say Amen and receive him and his salvation. Because of our human weaknesses and our difficulty in believing, God has graciously given us the sacraments, where we have something that we can both see and physically touch. In them the gift of Christ and

his salvation are dramatised and confirmed. Christ, the whole Christ, is through the Holy Spirit, present and giving himself to us to be our Saviour. In our actual receiving and eating and drinking the Holy Spirit assures us that we have received his salvation and Christ lives within us. We share with Christ in his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, are sealed as members of God's family, are made to sit 'with Christ in the heavenly realms',² and are made heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Our Lord commanded us to celebrate the two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion. Both sacraments are a sign and seal of all that is proclaimed and offered in Christ in the Word of God. In this article we are concerned with the Lord's Supper. It is important in the sacraments that the focus is always on Christ. The Lord's Supper (like Baptism) is primarily an act of God. It is a place where God acts in Christ for the salvation of his people. It is also an act of the church as we are called to respond to God's gift of life and salvation. But the primary focus is on Christ, the whole Christ, and on what God has done for us and the world in Christ. That is what is proclaimed. 'Very serious problems arise when the focus of attention is shifted from that objective ground to the ritual act in the foreground, that is, from the Person of the Mediator, God manifest in the flesh, to the sacramental rite as a means of saving grace'.³ The unhappy result of this shift is all too clear in the history of the church both Catholic and Reformed, although it is not an issue which we will discuss here.

First, we will consider the preparations for this sacrament in the Old Testament. As P. T. Forsyth has said, 'The key of the New Testament is in the Old Testament. The Old Testament explains the New Testament, as the New Testament interprets the Old. We cannot understand the Old Testament without the New; and we cannot account for the New Testament without the Old, which it fulfils. The child may be father of the man, but it is only the man who understands the child.'⁴ Accordingly, in seeking to understand the meaning, significance and importance of the sacrament of Holy Communion, it is helpful if first we turn to the Old Testament.

The rites of worship in the Old Testament were not carried over into New Testament worship. They were fulfilled and transformed in Christ. Holy Communion which was instituted by Christ was not

celebrated in the Old Testament, nonetheless there are several important strands to Old Testament worship which help us in our understanding of this sacrament. God alone initiates and orders the true worship of God. God said to Moses, ‘Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. [...] Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.’⁵ Every detail of the tabernacle together with all its furnishings were given by God to Moses. Everything was required to be made ‘according to the pattern shown [to Moses] on the mountain.’⁶ And it is recorded that everything was done just as the Lord commanded.⁷ Israel was not permitted to introduce anything in regard to the erection of the sanctuary, its furnishings or into the worship that took place within it that was not instituted and commanded by God. We can only rightly worship God in the way that God himself has ordained. Because of that the Reformers in celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion were insistent that a true celebration must follow as far as possible the pattern given to us by Christ and use the very words of Scripture.

We do not know when sacrifices were first instituted. We might conjecture that they were synchronous with the clothing of Adam and Eve when they were expelled from the Garden of Eden. God clothed them with animal skins after the animals were killed and their blood shed. Possibly Adam and Eve, in God’s mercy were given a glimpse of (1) Atonement for their sin and (2) Righteousness imputed by God’s Grace, thereby giving them, despite their sin, hope in God. In Hebrews chapter 11, we are told that ‘By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain’.⁸ It is not however until after God’s deliverance of his people out of Egypt, that we are given a full teaching about offerings and sacrifices.

God commanded the people of Israel through Moses, in their worship to offer a sacrifice. In Leviticus 1–7, we are given five great offerings, the Burnt-offering, the Grain-offering, the Peace-offering, the Sin-offering and the Guilt-offering together with the Law, or the way in which the people must celebrate these offerings. These offerings were in no sense given as a way of propitiating God. The emphases in each of these offerings, as in the whole of Old Testament worship, was on what God does, not primarily on what man does. Worship involves

man coming to God, and presenting his offerings. But everything was required to be done in every detail as God commanded, because the primary actor in worship is God not man. True worship portrays what God has done, is doing and will do on man's behalf. What man does is simply a response to what God does.

One of the great sins of Israel was to turn the emphasis from what God does to what man does. All too often worship became an act of man. They offered countless offerings in order, as they thought, to propitiate God. Again and again the prophets denounced such worship. "The multitude of your sacrifices – what are they to me?" says the LORD. [...] "Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me." [...] "Your hands are full of blood! Wash and make yourselves clean.""⁹ "Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. [...] let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"¹⁰ Each of the offerings as ordained by God portrayed in a symbolic way God coming to meet his people in love, in mercy and forgiveness and anticipated the day when God would himself come and make atonement for his people and unite them in fellowship with himself in Christ. Each offering was a symbolic picture of the Divine Redeemer who was to come, a picture of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. Each is different and together they help us to understand Christ's sacrifice and atonement.

The first three, the Burnt-offering (or Thank-offering), Grain- (or Meal-) offering and the Peace- (or Fellowship-) offering, anticipate the self-surrender of Christ the Righteous One to the Father, to do his will in his life and death, on behalf of humanity and call for the total surrender of man to God. Their goal is peace – reconciliation and peace with the Father. Sin is not mentioned in any of the first three Offerings. In the fourth and fifth Offerings, that is in the Sin-offering and the Guilt- (or Trespass-) offering, Christ is pre-figured as the One who will, by his life and death, make atonement for our sins restoring us to fellowship with the Father and also, which is especially pre-figured in the fifth offering, restoring us to fellowship with our fellow men and women. Each of these offerings helps us to understand more fully what Christ has done for us in his life, death, resurrection and ascension and helps us in our understanding of what Christ is offering us in the Lord's Supper.

Four of the sacrifices involved death. The worshipper was commanded to lay his or her hands on the animal about to be sacrificed. By this act the worshipper was meant to understand that he or she identified him-self or her-self with the offering and that it was through the death of the victim that he or she received forgiveness and new life. It is through our union with Christ in his life, death, resurrection and ascension that we, through the Holy Spirit, obtain forgiveness and salvation.

It is significant that in the Old Testament there is no sacrifice for what is called in the Authorised Version, 'sins of a high hand'. Sins of a high hand are apostasy or the worship of idols (that is the rejection of God), murder and adultery. Murder is the killing of another person created in the image of God. Adultery is treated like the murder of another. The penalty for 'sins of a high hand' was death. The only alternative, as in the case of King David, when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and then murdered her husband Uriah by the sword of Moab, was to fling himself on the mercy of God. In doing that, God forgave David. Jesus said, 'I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin'.¹¹ 'Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit' is the utter or final rejection of Christ and is anticipated in the Old Testament by 'sins of a high hand'.

It is helpful to mention the Shew Bread that was baked and laid fresh before God every day in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple. It was called the 'Bread of the Presence'. Bread was considered to be the stuff of life. It reminded the people that God is the Giver and Sustainer of life. After it was removed from the Presence, it was eaten by the priests, although it could be eaten and was by others. Ahimelech the priest and father of Abiathar, gave the consecrated bread to David when he escaped from Saul.¹² The 'Shew Bread' anticipated in a symbolic way the Word of God which in Christ became flesh, and gives life to the world, nourishing us spiritually and physically. Jesus said, 'I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world'.¹³ Those words in John chapter 5 anticipate the sacrament of Holy Communion. The fact that the

bread was unleavened reminded Israel of the bitterness of their life in Egypt and of their hasty flight from Egypt. One final and important contribution from Old Testament worship which we will consider later is the feast of the Passover.

We now turn to the New Testament. Here, Holy Communion is a feast of thanksgiving commemorating God's atonement in Christ for the sins of the world. It proclaimed, as a seal of God's Word, that the way has been opened for all to pass from life lived under the powers of darkness and hell, to life in the Kingdom of God. The Passover and all that it represented, together with the other elements of Old Testament worship, including the five sacrifices and the 'Shew-Bread', was fulfilled in Christ, and replaced by the sacrament of Holy Communion. As we said earlier the Old Testament worship helps us in our understanding of Christ and his saving work and helps us to understand the sacrament. The five sacrifices help us to understand in depth the different aspects of Christ's work of atonement, so central to his ministry and the focus of Holy Communion.

When the sacrament of Holy Communion is ordered according to the Word of God and duly consecrated, there is created by the action of God, through the Holy Spirit, an intimate relationship between the elements and what they represent. Hence, when we eat and drink in faith, with prayer, we actually receive the body and blood of Christ and share anew in all that Christ has done for us. The elements of bread and wine are not empty symbols, detached from Christ and simply pointing to him and his saving work. They remain bread and wine. They do not physically become the body and blood of Christ as the Roman Catholic church teaches. Yet, spiritually, as we receive them in faith, we actually eat his body and drink his blood as Jesus said, in John's Gospel.¹⁴ Through the Holy Spirit we share in Christ's life and death to our sins and share in his resurrection and ascension.

The risen Christ, then, is present in this sacrament. In the language of John Calvin, Christ, clothed with his Gospel, clothed with his life, death and resurrection presides at this table. We are his guests. Our prayer is not that he will be present – he has promised to be present when we meet in his name. Our prayer is that we will be aware of his Presence: that we will hear him speaking and that we will spiritually receive him, his body and blood as he offers them to us. This is

wonderfully expressed in Horatius Bonar's hymn, "Here, O my Lord, I see thee face to face".

Jesus said, 'Do this in remembrance of me'. In asking his disciples to 'remember', Jesus is not simply asking them to recall events long past but to recall them in such a way that the past is re-enacted and through the Holy Spirit they participate in the past as a present reality. Jesus asked his disciples in their worship to celebrate what he and the disciples did on the last night before he was crucified. At the same time it is important that we also recall what took place in the evening of the day of resurrection. These two events of Jesus meeting with his disciples on the last night and his meeting with them on the evening of the first day of resurrection together give us the sacrament of Holy Communion.

(a) On the night that he was betrayed, Jesus celebrated the Passover Meal with his disciples. The Passover commemorated God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in the land of Egypt. It taught the people of Israel continually to give thanks for the deliverance and to look forward to a greater deliverance in the future, when with the coming of the Messiah, God would deliver them from suffering, from sickness, from sin and death and when God would usher in his Kingdom. Central to that meal was the eating of a sacrificial lamb, whose blood sprinkled on the lintel and doorposts of their houses, caused the angel of death to pass over their homes, when Israel was in Egypt. The lamb was eaten with bitter herbs and vegetables dipped in vinegar or salt and unleavened bread reminding them of the bitterness of their slavery in Egypt. There were four cups of wine. The wine represented the blood of the Passover lamb. There were various washings of hands. The four cups are not mentioned in the Gospel because we are not given in the Gospels a full account of the actual celebration of the Passover. The first cup was the cup of consecration which consecrated the Passover. The third was the cup of Blessing. The host, after the Passover had been eaten, took the third cup. All present recited the special blessing over the third cup then drank it. Thereon they recited Psalms 115–118 (psalms of praise) and

drank the fourth cup. They closed the meal with a hymn and prayer.

The Jews did not eat immediately following the Passover, so it is deeply significant that after celebrating the Passover Jesus took the bread of the *avikomen* (the bread that was customarily set aside for the coming Messiah), gave it to his disciples and said, 'This is my body'. He took the cup, that had been set aside, gave it to his disciples and said, 'This is my blood of the new covenant'. Jesus intimated that he was the fulfilment of the Passover Meal. He was and is the Lamb of God. As such he inaugurated 'The Lord's Supper' or Holy Communion.

In giving the symbols of his body and blood to the disciples he was uniting them to himself as the Lamb of God in his coming death to sin on the cross and uniting them to himself in his coming resurrection and exaltation.

(b) On the evening of the first day of resurrection Jesus reappeared to his disciples in the upper room. Having, through his death on the cross, made peace between man and God, between man and man, and procured an inner peace for all of us to enjoy, he came and gave his peace to his disciples. Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."¹⁵

When Jesus gave to his disciples his peace, he commissioned them as his ambassadors to the world. He commanded them to go forth and share the news of his salvation with everyone. In breathing on them he gave them his Holy Spirit, his power to accomplish all that he commanded them to do. The disciples went out and after Pentecost took the Gospel of salvation to the world. It is important that in the celebrating of this sacrament that we have before us *both* occasions when Jesus met with his disciples in the upper room. Both events are important and it is both together which give us the sacrament.

Clearly Jesus intended that we should celebrate this sacrament often, whereas it was intended that Baptism should be celebrated once. Baptism proclaims our once-and-for-all incorporation into the Body of Christ, our entry into the Kingdom of God. Holy Communion proclaims our need, when we are in the Kingdom, to be constantly fed on the body and blood of Christ, to be constantly renewed and strengthened, until in the *parousia* we are perfected and made to rejoice with Christ in his new or renewed creation.

That is why we have two sacraments; one which seals His once-and-for-all work of salvation, and one which continually seals our renewal in that finished work and gives us to participate in its effective operation until He comes again in power and glory. There is then in the Lord's Supper both a sacramental fulfilment and an eschatological suspension, and they belong together inseparably, and therefore it is most important to hold Baptism and the Lord's Supper closely together.¹⁶

The Reformers Calvin and Knox thought that the church should celebrate the sacrament every Sunday at worship. They were however concerned that people should understand the Gospel and understand the meaning of Christ's salvation and the meaning of the sacrament which could only rightly be received in faith. They therefore recommended that the church should celebrate the sacrament once a month until the people were better instructed in the faith and were aware of all that is meant. Historically the Reformed church in Scotland instead of progressing to once a week progressed to infrequent celebrations of once or twice a year and later three or four times a year.

Jesus, clothed with his death and resurrection, presides at this table. Through the Holy Spirit, he re-enacts what he did in the upper room both on the last night before his death on the cross and on the evening of the first day of resurrection. We spiritually, in eating and drinking, share with Christ in his death to sin and the world, and we share with him in his resurrection and ascension. We rise to new life in Christ. We receive Christ's risen, ascended human life. He gives us his 'Peace' and re-commissions each of us to be his personal ambassador to the world, to share the Gospel and tell others the great things that he has done. Through the Holy Spirit he gives us all the wisdom and power required to carry out his commission.

Christ's whole life from his incarnation to his death, resurrection and ascension, was lived for our salvation. Hence when in prayer we eat the bread and drink the wine, we are assured that we are not just forgiven, our sins cancelled out and declared innocent before God. We receive Christ's new, perfect human life, his whole life from his incarnation to ascension, enabling us to live in fellowship with the Holy God, and are given power, through the Holy Spirit, to live and serve him. This is possible because Christ is both God and Man in one Person. My brother T. F. Torrance writing on this subject, has said,

It seems to me to be of fundamental importance that we understand the saving work of Christ to be grounded in His incarnate Person as God and Man in hypostatic union, and see that hypostatic union as atoning reconciliation already in action pressing hard toward its *telos* in the crucifixion; and see that not only in His ministry as the mighty Act of God toward man, but as the act of obedient Man toward Holy God. Only when we are able to give the human nature of Christ the saving significance it occupies in the New Testament, and see the relation of His whole life to reconciliation, will we be in a proper position to understand what it means to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ, and understand what the real presence actually means.¹⁷

In and through the Person of Christ and his mighty act of salvation, there is a twofold reconciliation. In Christ God is reconciled to us and we are in Christ reconciled to God, and are enabled, through the new life that we receive, to live in fellowship with him and to serve him in forwarding his Kingdom. This lies at the centre of our participation in this sacrament and in his commissioning us to serve him.

Here also is the guarantee of our resurrection: Jesus as Man lived, died, rose again and ascended vicariously on our behalf. As Man he died physically and physically as Man rose again and ascended in the body. When we are united to Christ as Saviour and receive him through the Holy Spirit we share in Christ's physical life, death, resurrection and ascension: 'it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly

realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.¹⁸ Christ's risen, human life becomes, by grace, our life, and is a foretaste of the day when we are fully clothed with Christ, and will rejoice with him in the Kingdom of Heaven. His resurrection in the body is the guarantee of our physical resurrection and of that day when we shall see him face to face.

Prayer and thanksgiving for all that God has done for us should be a dominant part in our celebration of the sacrament. This is preserved in the term 'Eucharist', which means 'thanksgiving'. In the early church Holy Communion was celebrated as a joyous feast of the resurrection. Emphasis largely fell on the resurrection. Later, the emphasis moved from the resurrection to the events of the last night and to Christ's death on the cross. The sacrament tended to become a memorial of Christ's death. Later in the development of the medieval doctrine of the Mass, the church wrongly came to regard the sacrament as the offering of Christ to the Father. In Vatican II, 1962–65, the church recovered the doctrine of the resurrection, thereby knocking out the medieval doctrine of the Mass. Mass, although the Roman Catholic church continues to use the name Mass, now became the sacrament of Holy Communion and their understanding lies very close to the understanding of the Reformed church. It is very moving to hear the congregation say, 'Christ has died, Christ has risen' and to say 'Christ has died, Christ has risen, we are risen'.

The Jews in celebrating the Passover, gave thanks for God's deliverance of the nation out of Egypt, and looked forward to the coming of the Messiah who would usher in his completed kingdom, when all sin, suffering and death would be swept away. We celebrate this feast as a foretaste of the great day when Christ will come again to this earth in Glory. The sacrament and our celebration of it anticipates the consummation of Christ's Kingdom on earth, when all creation will be renewed and the kingdoms of this world have become the Kingdom of God and his Christ.

The Jews failed as a nation to recognise and accept Jesus as their Messiah, in part, because their timetable of coming events was wrong. They believed that with the coming of the Messiah his completed kingdom would come right away. They failed to realise that with Jesus

the Kingdom of God had in fact broken in to history. It came with Jesus and yet the fullness, the completeness of the Kingdom is yet to come. The miracles of Jesus, the healing of the sick, the strengthening of the lame, the opening of the eyes of the blind, the cleansing of the leper, the raising of the dead, were signs of the Presence of the Kingdom, that God himself was present in their midst, and pointed forward to the ultimate renewal of all creation. They were signs both of the Presence of the Kingdom, and of the fullness of his Kingdom that was to come. Likewise, Jesus in many of his parables directs our minds forward to the future, to the last day of history, the day of final Judgement – for which we all need to be prepared.

That is the day when Jesus will come again to this earth as King of kings, Lord of lords; when he will cleanse the heavens and the earth of all suffering and pain and of all that is evil and sinful; when he will renew all things so that they become his new, or re-newed, creation; when those who reject him will be removed from his Presence for ever and he will gather all from every nation who love him, perfect them and cause them to live and reign with him for ever. We look forward in Christ each time we celebrate this sacrament. Our goal in life is to be with Christ in his Kingdom. We celebrate this sacrament until he comes and renews all things. The Lord's Supper is 'essentially a prelude to the new creation.'¹⁹

Feast after feast thus comes and passes by;
Yet, passing, points to the glad feast above,
Giving sweet foretaste of the festal joy,
The Lamb's great bridal feast of bliss and love.²⁰

We can only rightly approach Christ and participate in the sacrament when we do so in prayer. This was emphasised by the Reformers and a strong point with both Calvin and Knox. Sadly, in practice it is not often emphasised as we celebrate the sacrament today in the Reformed church. It is emphasised symbolically in the Anglican tradition by the fact that the worshipper kneels to receive the sacrament.

It is not simply our prayer which is important. Of supreme importance is the prayer and intercession of the risen, ascended Christ, who ever lives to make intercession for us. He is our heavenly

Mediator and High Priest.²¹ Without him we cannot approach the Father.²² We rightly approach the sacrament in the joyful awareness that he welcomes us and is lovingly praying for us. In our acceptance our prayers are sanctified and embraced within his prayers.

As Christ is the only High Priest, “He is at the right hand by whom we offer anything to the Father”. It is by Christ that our prayer at the Eucharist is offered, or to put it otherwise: Christ’s High Priestly prayer (which we are given to overhear in John 17) is behind our prayer at the Eucharist when we spread forth the bread and wine and pray in Christ’s name.²³

Sin cannot enter nor endure the holy presence of God. As the Bible makes plain, ‘the wages of sin is death’.²⁴ Because God in Christ took on himself our sins and the sins of the world and ‘became sin for us’, so God took on himself in Christ his own judgement on sin. It is through Christ’s vicarious death that we have life. In Christ and through him we are given, through the Holy Spirit, his gift of a new life. This is humbling and yet joyful. It fills us with love and thanks to God, in anticipation of his new creation.

Who is invited to celebrate this sacrament? Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer, believed that only those who actually believed and had received Christ as Saviour, should receive this sacrament. Against that John Calvin argued that this sacrament was given not only for those who had received Christ but also for those who sincerely wanted to receive Christ and who for the creation of faith needed the visible, tangible symbols of Christ and his saving work. He argued that God in his Grace gave us not simply the audible Word which we hear, but, as an accommodation to our weakness, the visible Word which we can see and touch in order to create faith for salvation. The sacrament is intended not simply to strengthen the faith of believers but to arouse faith in those who wanted but did not have faith. It is a converting ordinance.

John Knox, the Scottish Reformer, said, ‘consider, then, that this Sacrament is a singular medicine for all poor sick creatures, a comfortable help to weak souls, and that our Lord requires no other worthiness on our part, but that we unfeignedly acknowledge our

naughtiness and imperfection.²⁵ To paraphrase the words of Robert Bruce,²⁶ who followed John Knox as minister of St Giles, Edinburgh, ‘Perhaps you feel unworthy to come. Perhaps you feel deeply conscious of sin. Perhaps because of your sin you feel you cannot lift up your head toward heaven, but you want Christ’s forgiveness and Christ’s cleansing, then come. Welcome! This table is for you.’

Although officially the Reformed church, at least in Scotland, embraced the teaching of Calvin, in practice and with the passage of the years, it followed the teaching of Zwingli. Hence there developed in Scotland what became known as ‘the fencing of the Lord’s Table’. Only those who were deemed worthy by the Kirk Session or by themselves participated in the sacrament of Holy Communion. It was and is a practice which throws the emphasis not on what God in his grace and love has done for us in Christ, but on us and on what we do in seeking to worship God. It belittles the Grace of God.

The Lord’s Supper is a corporate meal. It is a sacrament given to the whole Body of Christ. It was never intended to be a private rite or the rite of only a few. It proclaims our nourishment and renewal in the Body of Christ and proclaims God’s New Covenant for us all. ‘Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.’²⁷

In 1 Corinthians 11:29, we read ‘Anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself’. We can receive this sacrament with our hearts unrepentant and hardened, not discerning the Presence of the Lord and not grateful for what Christ has done for us. In that case this sacrament will not help us. It will make us worse, for we will bring judgement on ourselves! We cannot worship the Lord and at the same time cling to the gods of this world. As Paul said, ‘You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s Table and the table of demons.’²⁸ It must be one or the other.

To sin ‘against the body and blood of the Lord’ (1 Cor 11:27) can also refer to the sin of disunity. When, through the Holy Spirit, we are united to Christ we become united to others who are united to

Christ. Together we form the body of Christ on earth. We cannot have Christ within us, without our being united one to another in Christ. Furthermore, we can only receive God's forgiveness for our sins as we forgive others no matter how much they may have sinned against us. Any anger, any bitterness, any grudge, any lack of forgiveness to others will mar and destroy our relationship with God. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, 'For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.'²⁹

The Christians in Corinth tended to quarrel among themselves. They often manifested little compassion or understanding for the needs of others, particularly the poor. At times they seemed to be a deeply divided church and to exhibit many sins which marred their Christian life and witness. It is the same today. The sin of disunity runs right through society, through family life and often sadly through the church.

The sacrament of Holy Communion proclaims Christ who has forgiven us and demands that we forgive and love one another. To receive this sacrament refusing to forgive and be reconciled in love to all others, is to eat and drink judgement on ourselves. This is a great challenge to the churches in their separation the one from the other.

There is in 1 Corinthians 11 a further sin against the 'body and blood of our Lord',³⁰ with which Paul is concerned. As a result of this sin 'many are weak and sickly'. Commenting on this passage John Calvin says,

Paul now speaks of the punishment which they [the people in Corinth] were undergoing at that very time. We do not know if a plague was raging there at the time, or whether they were afflicted by other kinds of diseases. Whatever it was, we gather from what Paul says that the Lord had sent some scourge to discipline them. And when Paul says that they are being punished because of eating unworthily, he is certainly not hazarding a guess, but is asserting something of which he is very well aware. So he says that many lay sick.³¹

It is difficult to say with certainty if Calvin is correct in his interpretation. Possibly, theirs was not so much a wilful sin but what the Old Testament would call a ‘sin of ignorance’, which had physical consequences.³²

As Son of God, Jesus gave himself to be our Saviour. In his coming to earth as Man and yet God he took our flesh and blood and redeemed us. Through the Holy Spirit he comes as Man to live within us. Through the Holy Spirit as Man he lifts us up into union with himself. United with him we receive his cleansing and salvation and receive his New perfect human life. We receive a foretaste of complete healing from all sickness and should anticipate healing here and now, more than we do.

God said to Israel, ‘I am the LORD, who heals you.’³³ ‘He was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.’³⁴ As the Psalmist said, he ‘forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases’.³⁵ This is an aspect of the Lord’s Supper which, I believe, the church has all too readily passed over or omitted to stress. All too often we ‘eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord’ in ignorance, unmindful of the fact that here Christ in giving to us himself and his salvation, is at the same time, offering his New perfect body, that is free of all sickness and ill health.

Granted that as long as we live on this earth we will carry about us what Paul calls ‘the old man’, our sinful nature, even although we are forgiven and redeemed. We will never receive fully the New Life of Christ until we depart this life and enter heaven. Nonetheless in receiving Christ we do receive his New Body, his New Life and therefore receive and should expect to receive, a foretaste of his healing of all our sicknesses. God wants us to be renewed. He wants us to receive his new life in Christ and he wants us all to be well. Although we will not fully receive and enjoy that in this life, we should receive a real foretaste of that here and now in this sacrament as we open our hands to receive Christ and his salvation. We should expect to witness some renewal, strengthening and healing every time as we worship the Lord and we share in this sacrament.

The name ‘Eucharist’, another name for the sacrament, is helpful in that it reminds us that our receiving of this sacrament is an act of thanksgiving for all that God has done for us in Christ (see Ps 116:

12–14) and for all that he will yet do when our new life in Christ is finally manifest and we will see Christ face to face. Thanksgiving lies at the heart of all worship. The sacrament directs our attention forward in thanksgiving

to a future apocalyptic event when Christ will return as Lord and King in a visible way. The Kingdom of Heaven which has come awaits the final day when Christ will come and cleanse and renew the heavens and the earth, so that they become the New (or re-newed) Heaven and Earth. Christ came therefore to set up his Kingdom on earth and to call people out of the kingdoms of this world into the Kingdom of Heaven and therefore into the ultimate enjoyment of the New Creation.³⁶

God in Jesus Christ has broken triumphantly into this world of ours. He has wrought out his mighty victory over sin and death and over all the uncoordinated, indeterminate mass of suffering, which goes far beyond man's sin and rebellion against God. He has triumphed victoriously over all the powers of darkness and hell, and man is called to share today in that victory of Christ. This is the Gospel, the Good News, which the Church is called to proclaim".³⁷

This is the Good News which is enshrined and proclaimed in the sacrament of Holy Communion. The sacrament should be the occasion of great thanksgiving and joy, as we anticipate the renewal of all creation.

Notes

- ¹ T. F. Torrance, "Toward a Doctrine of the Lord's Supper" in *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, vol. 2 (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960), 156.
- ² Ephesians 2:6.

- ³ T. F. Torrance, “The Paschal Mystery of Christ and the Eucharist” in *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays Towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (London: Geoffrey Chapman 1975), 107. In this article TFT discusses the unhappy consequences of the shift from the focus on the objective ground of Christ and his finished work to the ritual act.
- ⁴ P. T. Forsyth, *Lectures on the Church and the Sacraments* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1917), 214.
- ⁵ Exodus 25:1, 8, 9.
- ⁶ Exodus 25:40; 26:30.
- ⁷ Exodus 35:29; 36:1; 39:1, 5, 7, 21, 26, 29, 31, 32, 42, 43; 40:16, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 32.
- ⁸ Hebrews 11:4.
- ⁹ Isaiah 1:11, 13, 15–16.
- ¹⁰ Amos 5:22, 24. Also Micah 6:6–8.
- ¹¹ Mark 3:28, 29.
- ¹² 1 Samuel 21:3f.
- ¹³ John 6:51.
- ¹⁴ John 6:51–55.
- ¹⁵ John 20:21–23.
- ¹⁶ Torrance, “Toward a Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper”, 146.
- ¹⁷ T. F. Torrance, “Doctrinal Consensus on Holy Communion”, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 15 (1962): 10.
- ¹⁸ Ephesians 2:5–7.
- ¹⁹ Torrance, “Toward a Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper”, 139.
- ²⁰ Horatius Bonar.
- ²¹ Hebrews 7:24, 25.
- ²² See John Knox, “A Declaratioun What Trew Prayer Is, How We Suld Pray, and For What We Suld Pray” in *The Works of John Knox* (ed. J. Laing; 6 vols.; Edinburgh: James Thin, 1895), III:83–105.
- ²³ T. F. Torrance, “The Place of the Humanity of Christ in the Sacramental Life of the Church”, *Church Service Society Annual* 26 (1956): 6. Reprinted in T. F. Torrance, *Gospel, Church and Ministry* (ed. Jock Stein; Eugene, Or.: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 88.
- ²⁴ Romans 6:23.

- ²⁵ *The Liturgy of John Knox, received by the Church of Scotland in 1564* (Glasgow: University Press, 1886), 141.
- ²⁶ See *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper: Sermons on the Sacrament Preached in the Kirk of Edinburgh by Robert Bruce in A.D. 1589* (trans. and ed. T. F. Torrance; London: James Clark, 1958).
- ²⁷ Ephesians 4:3–6.
- ²⁸ 1 Corinthians 10:21.
- ²⁹ Matthew 6:14, 15.
- ³⁰ Verse 27.
- ³¹ John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (trans. John W. Fraser; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), 254.
- ³² This not an interpretation which my brother TFT suggested or which I discussed with him.
- ³³ Exodus 15:26.
- ³⁴ Isaiah 53:5.
- ³⁵ Psalms 103:3.
- ³⁶ See David W. Torrance, “What Kind of Ministry?” in ed. Jock Stein, *Ministers for the 1980s* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1979), 6f.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.