



‘In This Sacrament the Whole of What Our Religion Means is Expressed’

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The title for this article is part of a quotation from the writings of the Congregational New Testament scholar, C. H. Dodd:

In this Sacrament we accept that which God gives, become that which He makes of us (by grace, not merit) and render it up to Him ... Indeed, in this Sacrament the whole of what our religion means is expressed. That which otherwise we apprehend piecemeal is integrated in a rite which presents it all as the sheer gift of God. On any one occasion we may be conscious only of this or that element in the meaning; but it is all there, because God in Christ is there. In dependence on Him for everything, we render it all back to Him in thankful adoration.¹

I have been asked to reflect on the Sacrament in the life and worship of our community, and to explore recent work by scholars of the Reformed tradition on the development of our thought and practice with regard to this central event in the Christian life. The above quote by C. H. Dodd offers a framework for further exploration of these themes.



Celebrating the Lord’s Supper

In the Cathedral Church of St Machar in Aberdeen the Sacrament is celebrated on the morning of the last Sunday of each month and on Festivals, and on the first Sunday of each month in the evening. The Order of Service used is that of the *Book of Common Order*, with the congregation joining in the spoken responses – the Kyrie, the Apostles’ Creed, the Sursum Corda, Sanctus, Benedictus and the Agnus Dei. The celebration of the Sacrament in the morning services and at Festivals continues the tradition of the double procession (Lesser and Great Entrance), with the elements being carried through the community. At the evening service in a side chapel, the participants gather round the

table for the Prayer of Thanksgiving – thus reflecting the practice of the Swiss Reformed Churches.

Prior to the sermon, the prayer for illumination is taken from one of the fathers or mothers of the Church, ranging from St Ambrose to Dag Hammarskjöld. This is to emphasise the importance of the prayer to the Holy Spirit in seeking understanding, and our participation in the communion of saints. After the sermon, for some moments there is Music for Meditation, where the organist plays meditatively while we all reflect on the Word of God – thus taking up the emphasis of John Calvin and other Reformers that the church is where the Word of God is truly preached *and heard*. Instead of the *Book of Common Order* service on occasions, the *Worship Book of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, the services of the Iona Community, or those from other worship books are used.

A weekly service on Friday mid-day of Prayers for Justice and Peace is also held, thus allowing us to focus on the needs of our world. One of the impulses for this service came from a prayer attributed to John Calvin:

Save us, Lord, from being self-centred in our prayers, and teach us to remember to pray for others. May we be so caught up in love for those for whom we pray, that we may feel their needs as keenly as our own, and pray for them with imagination, sensitivity, and knowledge. We ask this in Christ's name.²

In prayers of intercession on Sundays, the possibility of really focussing on any one situation in our world is not easy, and not appropriate in that event since the varying needs of Church, world, community and individuals need to be lifted up in prayer. The Friday prayers allow us the possibility of entering more adequately, and with knowledge, sensitivity and imagination, the context for which prayer is sought and/or offered.



The Sacrament as an event of Christ's presence and a community celebration

Over the past two years, the community has reflected on the nature of the Sacrament by focussing on each of the elements in the service in turn which are, as C. H. Dodd noted,

... integrated in a rite which presents it all as the sheer gift of God.

Thus we have explored the meaning of the processions; the call to worship; the remembrance of God's activity in Creation (the concept of blessing – *berakah*); the prayer for forgiveness and God's activity in forgiving us individually and as a community; the proclamation and hearing of the Word of God; the response of the community in affirming its trust in God; in the intercessions; in mission; in offering; the invitation to the meal; the kiss of peace; the remembrance of the death and resurrection of Jesus; the sending out in mission; and the blessing of God.

In this we are re-membling (*anamnesis*) the life, ministry of calling, teaching, healing, forgiving, interceding, commissioning, inviting, and the death and rising of Jesus. The whole drama of salvation in Christ is celebrated every time we celebrate the Sacrament. Christ, we believe, is present among us calling us, teaching us, forgiving us, making us whole, interceding with us and joining us to Himself and each other in his death and rising. As C. H. Dodd noted,

... it is all there, because God in Christ is there.

The celebration is an event of the Word, and an event of the community. The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is primarily a community event, rather than an ordinance for the strengthening of the individual's faith and Christian life. While these should not be polarised too much, it is important to note that, as with the worship of the people of Israel, the Sacrament is an event of the community in which the individual takes his or her place.



Contribution to our understanding and practice by scholars of the Reformed tradition

All the churches in the twentieth century have undergone renewal in respect of the Sacrament, both in respect of the liturgy itself and the understanding of the event. Much of this has been due to the liturgical movement, where scholars of different traditions have sought to trace the origins of the Sacrament, and not simply affirm their own confessional tradition's understanding and practice.³

Already at the end of the nineteenth century, the French Reformed pastor, Eugene Bersier of Paris had emphasised the centrality of the worship of the Church in Christian life and the need for Reformed churches to recover liturgical life. He himself had produced a liturgy that emphasised worship as a corporate action, and that balanced word and sacrament. Throughout the twentieth century, Bersier's call has been pursued in different Reformed churches by theologians and scholars who have also engaged in work with scholars and thinkers of other Christian traditions on the nature and meaning of the Sacrament. Churches themselves have prosecuted this agenda through the establishment of specific committees and commissions.

The Church of Scotland in the early part of the twentieth century, for example, established a Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion to address what many felt was 'the unfettered freedom of ministers to conduct worship as they saw fit, allowing diversity and even idiosyncrasy.' The committee, as with others in different Reformed churches, has played a central role in providing worship materials for the church and for leading reflection on the centrality of the Sacrament for the life of the community.

A major contribution to our understanding as a church, and ecumenically, of the practice and theology of the Sacrament has in fact been made by scholars of the Reformed tradition.⁴ They have helped others involved in the liturgical movement and in the Reformed Churches themselves to come to a greater appreciation of the meaning

and movement of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and have done so, consciously, as scholars shaped by their Reformed tradition.

Who were these scholars and what has been their contribution? Professor Donald Baillie of the University of St Andrews helped us to recover the meaning of 'Sacrament'; Oscar Cullmann of Strasbourg University and Franz Leenhardt of the University of Lausanne, helped us to recover again the meal traditions of the New Testament and in particular the resurrection meals of Jesus; Max Thurian of the Taizé Community provided a seminal study on *anamnesis* (remembrance) in the Old and New Testaments, and crafted a liturgy for the Taizé community – and a commentary on it – which influenced many churches; Jean-Jacques von Allmen of Neuchâtel University focussed on the importance of the *epiclesis* – the prayer to the Holy Spirit that Christ would be present through the Word and the bread broken; Professor T. F. Torrance of the University of Edinburgh emphasised the importance of Jesus being both gift and giver at the meal celebration and of Christ being the host of the meal; and Lukas Vischer, then Director of the Faith and Order Commission – a theologian of the Swiss Protestant churches – helped us to appropriate again the understanding of *berakah* (blessing) – though the seminal work on this was done by the Lutheran scholar Claus Westermann – and of intercession, a subject of his own primary research.⁵ While all these contributions had a significant role in ecumenical agreements,⁶ they have also been important for our own understanding and practice in the Reformed churches.



The impact of Biblical Studies

Clearly in an article of this scope it is not possible to elaborate on these various contributions to our understanding and practice. However, let me point to the impact of some of them. For Reformed scholars the matrix for their work on the Sacrament has been Scripture. Nearly every contribution by Reformed scholars has arisen from careful exegesis of Scripture – and through this they have recovered many of the insights of the fathers of the Reformed churches – particularly John Calvin.

The importance of the recovery of the meal traditions of the New Testament – and particularly of the post-Resurrection meals – emphasises the continuing presence of Christ as present among us and as host. The major reflection on this has been evident in the work of Oscar Cullmann, and also Franz Leenhardt.

It is no coincidence that our worship takes place on Sunday – the day of Resurrection (and the Eighth Day).⁷ Our celebration is therefore a joyful occasion and reflects a tradition encapsulated in the ancient Liturgy of St Basil:

Do this in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this Bread and drink this Cup, you show forth my death, and confess my resurrection.⁸

Oscar Cullmann goes further to suggest that this awareness of the post-Resurrection meal tradition was the key to understanding one of the primary New Testament expressions for and images of the Church – the community who eat salt together (the community who meet at the sign of the fish).⁹ Communion therefore is not simply a remembering of the death of Jesus but a joyful celebration of the resurrection. Through the recovery of the awareness of the importance of the post-resurrection meals, with their emphasis on the continuing presence of Christ as the community ate together, so there arises the awareness of Christ's presence as the community today breaks bread together.

Through preaching and teaching, particularly in the Swiss Reformed churches, the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–53) raised questions about the separation of Word and Sacrament. In this narrative, the breaking of bread and sharing of the cup led to an understanding of the appropriation of the Word which had been preached but not understood. A renewed appreciation of this incident led many to emphasise the inseparability of Word and Sacrament, and thus to recover Calvin's own insight that the Sacrament should be celebrated weekly. The Reformed churches in the Netherlands have now placed this text from Luke's Gospel as the introduction to their new worship book.¹⁰

Another question arising from biblical scholarship by the Reformed concerned the implications of the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1–58), with the suggested typology of the eating of the manna in the wilderness by the children of Israel. Many biblical scholars emphasised that this incident was for John's Gospel the principal meditation on the Lord's Supper. In congregations of Reformed churches in the Canton of Neuchâtel in the early 1970s – largely due to the work of Jean-Jacques von Allmen – a number of sermons explored the implication of the fact that children would also have been present in the wilderness and received the manna as members of the community. The question was therefore asked – should not children also receive the bread and wine – food for the journeying of the pilgrim people of God? For that Reformed church and for others, this has led to changes in their practice by the inclusion of children and has reinforced the fact that the Sacrament is a community meal.

The recovery of the emphasis on Christ as the host of the meal – which is so well expressed in one of the liturgies of the Iona Community¹¹ – raises the question of the order of receiving the bread and wine by the celebrant and the community. The celebrant, rather like the king in Psalm 85, acts with a dual function, re-presenting the community and re-presenting Christ. In exploring the approach of Jesus to individuals and the community, it does not seem probable that our Lord would have placed himself first. Indeed all his actions – particularly in the washing of the feet of the disciples – indicate that he gave an example of service to the community, placing seeking to satisfy the needs of others first. Thus many ministers in the Reformed tradition receive the bread and wine at celebrations of the Sacrament after the community has been served to symbolize this.

Another biblical insight developed by Reformed scholars that has been of importance for the understanding and practice of Reformed churches, among others, has focussed on the term *anamnesis*. While work had been done on the term by Dom Gregory Dix and by Joachim Jeremias, it was the study undertaken by Max Thurian, a Reformed scholar and co-founder of the Taizé community, that was particularly influential for our churches.¹² In the context of the Taizé community,

Brother Max was involved in shaping the *ordo* of the community's worship and in developing an understanding of the nature and meaning of worship. He had a major responsibility for the text of the Taizé liturgy – and for the accompanying commentary which enabled the participants to understand the significance of the various elements or stages in the progression of the rite. That is, those elements which as C. H. Dodd eloquently put it are,

... integrated in a rite which presents it all as the sheer gift of God.

Thurian produced for the community an extensive study of the meaning of the word *memorial* in the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. In the study Brother Max emphasised the phrase 'do this in memory of me', seeing it as deriving from the liturgical language of the Jewish community, particularly associated with the celebration of Passover. As he indicates, during the Last Supper Jesus would have prayed,

Blessed art Thou, O Lord, Our God, King of the earth, who hast given to Thy people Israel this season of festivity for joy and for a memorial¹³

Each item of food at the feast had its own significance, and as the Jews ate the food, they re-lived and re-live mystically and sacramentally the events of the deliverance and exodus from Egypt. 'Memorial' is thus the becoming one with the event and effects of deliverance, and the re-appropriating of the promises of God. Thurian emphasises that in one of the prayers, God is being asked to recall the Messiah – a recalling to God of the promise he had made and asking God to fulfil the promise. He asserts,

... in the paschal meal, we find a triple anamnesis, a triple memorial: of a past deliverance regarded as typical, of a present deliverance through the sacramental action of the paschal meal and of a coming salvation in the day of the Messiah. [...] The past deliverance becomes a pledge of that which is to come, which will be perfect and definitive.¹⁴

The event of deliverance is, therefore, present in the worshipping community, liberating the community now, and inviting them to live in the horizon of final and complete liberation. It is an event both within and beyond time.

In this study, Max Thurian is also emphasising the corporate nature of the celebration. The memorial is an offering to God. It is a thanksgiving to God that God has united himself with the believer and the believing community through Christ – because of Christ’s sacrifice God remembers only his mercy. The memorial is a re-presentation of that sacrifice of Christ. In Hebrews, *anamnesis* is paralleled with *aphesis* – remission of sin. The Eucharistic celebration is therefore also an event of forgiveness for individuals who truly repent and for the community who constantly sing ‘*Kyrie eleison* – Lord have mercy’. Once more a Reformed scholar draws out the importance of the insight of C. H. Dodd that,

... in this sacrament the whole of what our religion means is expressed.

A further Reformed contribution to our appreciation of the centrality of the Sacrament which has also had an impact on the practice of Reformed and other churches has been that of the Swiss Reformed theologian Lukas Vischer in his study on intercession. In tracing as he does the biblical understanding of intercession through an extensive analysis of the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament, Vischer leads us to the awareness of our being joined in Christ with the Church of all places and times through intercession. Such is also the force of the prayer, cited earlier, which has been attributed to John Calvin. This prayer is based on Calvin’s strong baptismal and Eucharistic ecclesiology. Vischer reminds us that Christ draws our prayers of intercession into the prayer to the Father, and that we are joined in our celebration with the saints of all ages and all places. He recovers a strong Christological basis for intercession through his biblical study of the concept, noting that:

The entire work of Christ can be presented from this standpoint, as intercession. In one sense, what he did was simply to intercede

for us all. He meets us all with perfect love. He bears the burdens of others. He heals, He sets us free at the cost of his own freedom. He ends his life on a cross. By his life and by his death, he brings us into the presence of God in order that we may be welcomed into fellowship with him. His life and his death are an intercession, above all, for his disciples. By his intercession they are set free for a new life, united in a new fellowship, and called to bear witness in the world [...] He is the source of the fellowship which binds them to each other. When they intercede for one another with God, his intercession is there in the background. It leaves its stamp on what they are able to do for one another¹⁵

Lukas Vischer provided a solid basis for linking intercession to the event of the Lord's Supper, and to an awareness of the communal character of the celebration. So influential was this study that the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches took two initiatives, both of which have found a place in the worship of many Reformed churches. The Commission drew up an ecumenical prayer cycle where through the year on each Sunday worshippers are joined through intercessions with churches in different nations.¹⁶ This has led congregations to have a greater sense of being joined with Christians and communities beyond the borders and boundaries of their nation and ecclesial tradition. Secondly, Vischer, through the Faith and Order Commission, encouraged the churches to draw up an ecumenical calendar of the saints,¹⁷ thus encouraging congregations and churches to have a greater sense of being joined with Christians of different ecclesial traditions and of different nations throughout all the ages. This of course also reinforces the importance of the introduction to the Sanctus in the Prayer of Thanksgiving:

Therefore, with your people
of all places and times,
and with the whole company of heaven,
we proclaim your greatness¹⁸

This is currently a project of the churches under the title “The Cloud of Witnesses”, and it is an encouragement for the churches in each place and time to join with and learn from the churches of other places

and times. It is also an encouragement to explore the prayers by the fathers or mothers of the Church, and thus experience the rich tapestry of prayer from the saints of different traditions and ages.

The recovery of the meaning and practice of intercession has also been important for the re-emphasis on the link between worship and work, between worship and service in society. The Reformed scholar Jean-Jacques von Allmen focussed on this in his work on the meaning of the word *leitourgia*.¹⁹ The term ‘liturgy’ is used in the New Testament of the worship of the community and of the collection taken for the poor in Jerusalem. In this way it takes up the Hebrew word *avodah* which means both work and worship. Since the same term is being used for two aspects of life then these two aspects are intrinsically linked. Because of this, Reformed theologians who have been engaged in reflecting on ethical questions and on the role of the Christian community in society have done so deeply conscious that the Christian community’s life in the world is shaped by the events of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.²⁰



Concluding remarks

In drawing on these insights by Reformed scholars who have helped to shape our worship and our understanding clearly there is a re-appropriation of the heritage of the Reformed tradition. Through the work of these and other scholars a greater appreciation of the insights of John Calvin has resulted. The awareness that the sacrament is an event of the community and that the individual takes his or her place in that context is a major focus of the ministry and teaching of John Calvin – as Bernard Cottret and Elsie Ann McKee have shown.²¹ While these scholars did not set out to examine Calvin’s work, but have developed their thought from the study of Scripture, a greater appreciation of his thought both within the Reformed churches and by others through ecumenical dialogue has been evident. However, as the 2001 Symposium in Geneva on Reformed worship affirmed,

Our primary concern is not that worship should be *Reformed* but that it should be truly Christian worship.²²

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a celebration of the fullness of the drama of salvation in Christ, an expression of the identity of the community – of how the community understands itself and the society it seeks to serve – a confession to the world of God's intention for humankind, and a charter for engagement with issues of humanization and dehumanization. Since the Sacrament is celebrated in each time and place, the Church, through its various attempts to be faithful, affirms that unity in diversity which is an essential witness in a fragmented world. The Sacrament, then, at each celebration, as C. H. Dodd suggests, *draws us into the whole drama of salvation*.

- ¹ C. H. Dodd, *Christian Worship* cited in F. W. Dillistone, *C. H. Dodd: Interpreter of the New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), 195 f.
- ² In Dorothy M. Stewart, ed., *The Westminster Collection of Christian Prayers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 314.
- ³ Perhaps the bringing together of the results of the liturgical movement and of Reformed scholarship can best be seen in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Faith and Order Paper no. 111: Geneva: WCC, 1982), and Max Thurian and Geoffrey Wainwright, eds., *Baptism and Eucharist: Ecumenical Convergence in Celebration* (Faith and Order Paper no. 117: Geneva: WCC, 1983).
- ⁴ See my “Word, Sacrament, and Communion: New Emphases in Reformed Worship in the Twentieth Century,” in *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Past and Present* (ed. L. Vischer; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 142–58.
- ⁵ See Donald M. Baillie, *The Theology of the Sacraments* (London: Faber, 1957); Jean-Jacques von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (trans. H. Knight and W. F. Fleet; London: Lutterworth, 1965); Jean-Jacques von Allmen, *The Lord's Supper* (trans. W. F. Fleet; London: Lutterworth, 1969); Max Thurian, *The Eucharistic Memorial* (trans. J. G. Davies; 2 vols.; London: Lutterworth,

1960–1961); Oscar Cullmann and F. J. Leenhardt, *Essays on the Lord's Supper* (trans. J. G. Davies; London: Lutterworth, 1958); Oscar Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (trans. A. S. Todd and J. B. Torrance; London: SCM, 1953); 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: Chapman, 1975); Lukas Vischer, *Intercession* (trans. D. Lewis; Faith and Order Paper no. 95: Geneva: WCC, 1980); and Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Early Church* (trans. K. Crim; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

⁶ All of this scholarly research came into the international ecumenical sphere through interchurch dialogues. Donald Baillie was the chairman of the Faith and Order Study on Intercommunion in 1952. The work of Cullmann, Leenhardt, Thurian and von Allmen was central to the work of the Groupe des Dombes (a dialogue between Reformed and Roman Catholics in South-East France and Suisse Romande). J.-J. von Allmen, Max Thurian and Lukas Vischer were key to the Faith and Order Lima statement, and Tom Torrance to the Reformed-Roman Catholic Dialogue on the Presence of Christ in Church and World (1977). For the texts see Donald M. Baillie, *Intercommunion: Report of a Theological Commission of Faith and Order* (London: SCM, 1952); Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer, eds., *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level* (Faith and Order Paper no. 108: New York: Paulist Press; Geneva: WCC, 1984); *Modern Eucharistic Agreement* (London: SPCK, 1977).

⁷ See my “Sunday, Communion, Community” in *Milltown Studies* 53.1 (2004):1–13.

⁸ *Byzantine Daily Worship* (compiled and trans. J. Raya and J. de Vinck; Allendale, N. J.: Alleluia Press, 1969), 330.

⁹ The term *sunalitsesthai* (Acts 1:4) means assembly, but at root ‘the community which eat salt together’. Cullmann suggested that since fish was preserved with salt, this was a reference to the fact that Jesus ate fish with the apostles in one of the post-resurrection meals. The sign of the fish appeared in the catacombs, and the

Christian community met at the sign of the fish – probably not because of the mnemonic *ichthous* – but because of the experience of the post-resurrection meal of fish.

- ¹⁰ *Dienstboek een proeve / Schrift – maaltijd – gebed* (Zoetermeer: Boekcentrum, 1998).
- ¹¹ Wild Goose Worship Group, *A Wee Worship Book* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1999).
- ¹² Thurian, *The Eucharistic Memorial*, op. cit.
- ¹³ Thurian, *The Eucharistic Memorial*, I.12.
- ¹⁴ Thurian, *The Eucharistic Memorial*, I.28.
- ¹⁵ Vischer, *Intercession*, 5 f.
- ¹⁶ The latest edition of this is Hugh McCullum and Terry MacArthur, eds., *In God's Hands: Common Prayer for the World* (Geneva: WCC, 2006) – the prayers can also be found on the WCC web site – www.wcc-coe.org.
- ¹⁷ The early fruit of this work is Comunità di Bose, *Il libro dei Testimony, Martirologio Ecumenico* (Milan: Edizioni Sao Paolo, 2002); the Scottish churches through ACTS have been asked to contribute a list for the project. A further stage of the process is being undertaken in a consultation in Bose, October 2008.
- ¹⁸ *Book of Common Order* (3rd ed.; Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2005), 132 f.
- ¹⁹ von Allmen, *Worship*, 16.
- ²⁰ See Duncan Forrester's contribution to the Faith and Order exploration of this relationship in his "Ecclesiology and Ethics: A Reformed Perspective," *Ecumenical Review* 47.2 (1995): 248–54.
- ²¹ See Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography* (trans. M. W. McDonald; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000); Elsie Ann McKee, *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001).
- ²² Vischer, *Christian Worship*, 282.