



Epiclesis: A Way of Life

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*Send down your Holy Spirit on us
and on these gifts of bread and wine;
that they may become for us
the body and blood of your most dear Son¹*

‘I think I know what an epiclesis is’ commented a parishioner after conducting a highly unscientific survey by asking a random group from the congregation where I minister what they imagined it was. She was very much in the minority because few had even heard of the word, let alone identify it as part of a communion liturgy. After a short discussion about the epiclesis another parishioner responded, ‘I suspect for most of us groundlings this is not a big issue.’ I suspect he is right.

Of course, being unable to explain or identify the epiclesis is not exactly a crisis in the church nor is it a substantial reason to question its purpose or validity within the liturgy. It has been part of communion worship on and off for over one-and-a-half millennia and even though it is not something you will find in the earliest forms of the sacrament, nor anywhere in the Bible, it is part of our tradition ... mostly, and for those who do notice it, it can be the climactic moment where in the sacrament heaven and earth collide in the bread and wine. But as that same parishioner said, ‘I am sure it is important to some people, but I suspect most of us have other things to worry about, as should the church. It seems a small technical point compared to global warming, poverty, hunger etc.’ which is a reasonable reply to many things the church debates. In my view, however, the epiclesis speaks into and rises out of that worry about unsustainable living, food deserts and an unjust world.



Its history

Briefly, the epiclesis first appears around the middle of the fourth century in the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem² but it did not seem to be an essential part of the liturgy in the Western Church. The discussion of this has been much influenced by Hippolytus' *The Apostolic Tradition* since it was re-discovered and later published in 1851. This contains what is believed to be the earliest form of the epiclesis: 'we pray Thee that thou wouldst send Thy Holy Spirit upon the oblation of The Holy Church.'³ There are many questions still to be answered about the date of this epiclesis and, indeed, its originality. A number of scholars argue that the work may contain much later interpolations, one of which may be this epiclesis.⁴

Wherever its originality lies it has come to be the moment of consecration for many and has remained in use since then in one form or another, though not in every denomination. Indeed following the Protestant Reformation, Knox's *Book of Common Order* omits it and the great reformer warns against focusing on the bread and wine itself and moves the liturgy from the Thanksgiving Prayer immediately into the Distribution without even the words 'this is my body ...' such was his fear of turning the bread and wine into objects of worship.

And it has been in and out of use ever since in Western Christianity depending on which denomination you belong to. Certainly as more of God's People are given the opportunity for theological discussion within congregations today and as the more 'Progressive' wing of the Church is gaining confidence and enabling freer discussion and questions about our traditions among the people of the Church, the question is raised more and more about how formal liturgy works and what our traditions are based on. In my limited experience one particular question that raises its head regularly is about the task given over solely to the ordained in the sacrament: the epiclesis. In the congregation in which I serve no discussion is as vibrant, animated and lengthy as the one we have about communion and the epiclesis in particular.



Shape of the tradition

Clearly there is no evidence that the epiclesis goes back to the very early church. Despite the insights Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* gives us into the church in those early centuries there is no reason to believe that there was a unified, single order for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper handed down from the apostles. Such prescriptive forms as we do have in the writings of Paul and others from the early years do not contain any epiclesis. In the earliest times, it seems, there was little interest in liturgical form. Worship was about gathering, praying together and opening the Word. Indeed, Bultmann says that 'in Christian worship of this period there is neither sacrifice nor priest, nor is it bound to holy places or times'.⁵ Little attention seems to have been paid to The Supper in liturgical terms in those infant days, unlike the huge importance it has now in the traditions of a formalised institution.



The power

Being able to set something apart from its normal use is quite a powerful gift especially within religion. Popularly, it can be measured along the same lines as cursing and blessing. Those with the authority within a community to let something happen or to prevent it simply by their support or rejection are powerful people indeed. The great popularity of fantasy fiction such as J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, or Philip Pullman's more cynical and sinister *His Dark Materials* trilogy, reinforce the idea of the possession of special power rather than authority. The hero is set apart from earthly things to become somehow infused by that which is otherworldly.

In my experience, and within the congregation I serve, many believe ordination grants that 'power' (rather than authority) to an individual. To the ordained person, by virtue of their vocation, academic learning, their calling within the community, and the continuing of the tradition passed on to them, is conferred the power to set apart bread and wine. But this is not about power. Rather it is about authority. However, maybe the ordained person becomes instead a representative of

the community. Maybe each person throughout the history of the Church symbolically gathers there by the table, be it two or three or numberless folk. Maybe it is a timeless community, knowing that this bread and wine are for no other use than to symbolise the presence of Jesus Christ. But it is not set up like that in the liturgy or in the popular mind. The ordained person *is* given authority but this is understood as a special ability.

I would argue that the authority to set apart the bread and wine lies with the whole People of God by virtue of what they are doing there. From the beginning of the gathering to the benediction, the actions of the people proclaim what this bread and wine are about. In the expectation of eating with Jesus Christ, the actions *of the people* set the elements apart from all other earthly use. From the very beginning, when the bread is processed in, to when people share the peace; when prayers are spoken and Amens joined; when sermons are heard and the table is set and people gather – these actions form the epiclesis. Words are not necessary, and a four line consecration is inadequate. It is in the actions of God's People that the epiclesis is found – in their gathering, expectation, longing, faith and trust. These are the actions that change things, their understanding, their intent and their purpose.

We know that the early church had no need for a particular formula, neither did the early reformers. Indeed it may be that Knox refused to include an epiclesis in his *Book of Common Order* because the church had seen the danger of focusing too much priestly power on the elements. The action of sharing the bread in the context of worship was enough to recognise the holy meaning that the elements symbolised.



Come on down

Should we be calling down the Holy Spirit at all? The notion that the epiclesis is the calling down of the Holy Spirit is certainly not a biblical one. The closest activity in the Bible to a 'calling down' is in Acts 8:15 where the apostles pray that the Samaritan might 'receive' the Holy Spirit. There are examples of the Spirit coming 'upon' folk called to be prophets or upon Mary at the conception of Christ but

this is all about the Spirit coming upon humans. The idea of the Holy Spirit ‘coming down upon’ inanimate objects is completely foreign to our Scriptures.⁶

The word *epiclesis* is closer to the word ‘invocation’ or ‘called upon’. In Reformed thought a thorough biblical understanding was restored to the liturgy where the Spirit was called upon to fill God’s People that God’s will be accomplished in us. The work was to be done through God’s People and not through the elements.

The idea of calling down implies some sort of place from which the Spirit comes – such as above the clouds. This thinking ought to be immediately moved away from. Placing God spatially in a ‘heaven above’ serves no useful purpose and offers concrete thinkers such as children a false idea of where God resides. It suggests the Spirit at communion, shooting down like a bullet from somewhere above right into the bread and wine. Language such as ‘come upon the bread and wine’, or ‘fulfil in us the work of your Realm’, sits far better theologically and offers those new and fresh to the faith a more robust image of God’s presence and our calling through bread and wine.



That they may become for us ...

What do we expect to happen at the epiclesis? We have developed different traditions to answer this question. From a Presbyterian view the bread and wine remain bread and wine in every physical way other than a symbolic means to share the presence of Jesus. Jesus is present but not physically in bread and wine. The elements are keys to recognising Jesus presence in remembering his life, sharing the present circumstances and hoping towards a future that is God’s own. But whatever our tradition and culture I would argue that it is through the setting of the whole service the bread and wine become for us the body and blood of Christ.

Context is everything in engaging people with a truth. We are far more focused on Remembrance services when we are in the midst of conflict; we are more open to talk of resurrection on a bright spring

day in April after a Lent that dragged through a cold and wet February and March; our senses and spirit are more alive to renewal within our community after a weekend at a large festival such as Greenbelt or Spring Harvest. When the senses of God's People are brought alive through a much bigger experience they are more alive and expectant. The whole service becomes that bigger experience from the gathering space to the blessing and we are more alive to the presence of Jesus in the midst of us. As everything in the liturgy points towards the bread and wine and the presence, the whole act of worship becomes the marking and setting apart of the elements.

People may believe in a more concrete epiclesis where at the words of setting apart there is a stirring in heaven and the Holy Spirit pervades the wheat and grape as if responding to some signal. Alternatively we can believe that the passion and challenge and energy of God pervades all things anyway and that the context draws out that realisation. All bread and wine contain the whole story of Jesus, but in telling it, even as two or three are gathered, far away from any formal communion table and with no ordained person within a mile, the presence is revealed, that particular bread and wine are consecrated, and, set apart, their holy DNA is unfolded and celebrated and the presence of Jesus is joined.



Telling the story

Any child and most adults would admit that there is nothing more powerful than telling a story. Stories in themselves have an ability to live beyond the telling. They catch hold of your mind and spirit and help grasp mysteries, wonder and emotion. No wonder so much of our theology is told through story because you can't tie a story down as you can a rational argument or a systematic treatise. Somehow they exist like Dr Who's *Tardis*, much bigger on the inside, in the telling and living with than the outside title suggests.

The song lines of the First Nations of Australia have brought generations into a relationship with the land, inviting them to hear the sacred story of life, the value of the past and the responsibility for the present. The

story of the ancients call us in the present to a way of living in balance with everything.⁷ Our own shared story of creation, of seven days, if we were ever to truly believe its symbolism convicts us every time we uproot a tree or destroy a landscape for our own greed and gain. The story calls us into a relationship. Stories do that.

The story of the Last Supper calls us and invites us into a relationship with the whole intent and longing of God. Because it is not just a remembering of a past event it speaks into who we are now and what shall be. It is a poem that brings along with it all the salvation history of our faith, and the promises of that eschatological feast of renewal in God's Realm. There is power set loose in telling the story.

Then why do we do it so badly? In the retelling the liturgy shifts. Here is the pivot it all revolves around, this remembered history of bread and wine that was used by Jesus to proclaim the ways of heaven. Here is the main activity that sets apart the elements for they can be for no earthly or mundane use after the story is retold, for look, here, here is the very bread and wine that invites us to be Jesus' followers, table guests and people of the Way. This is a far more powerful consecration than the traditional words of the epiclesis and I would argue that this story ought to be told by all of God's People rather than reserved for clergy. For example, if the overarching theme of the communion service was about the environment, then it would be logical for those people in the faith community who are involved in the environmental movement to tell the story. It is theirs. If the context for the whole service was welcoming the stranger then ought not it be someone who works with Shelter or another homeless organisation who should retell the story for it is theirs. They can tell it honestly and with integrity because it speaks into who they are.

This vital moment in the sacrament ought to have the very centre of the liturgy. It should stand on its own in the service, and be allowed to be retold by those who know the story in their context, be that one of homelessness, or experiencing injustice, someone who has received particular compassion or someone who has received forgiveness, to name a few examples. In an honest and very real retelling such as

these could be, the community recognises and affirms that this bread and wine are consecrated. They could be nothing else, for the elements are telling the story of renewal, hope and transformation within the real context of people's lives and experiences. The story of the bread and wine is already doing its work and the Spirit who already pervades the story is acknowledged, affirmed and celebrated.



To be ordained or not

Thus I would argue that the whole setting apart of the elements is not necessarily the preserve of those who are ordained. As already stated, it is the actions and intent of the whole People of God that sets the bread and wine apart in the telling of the story. For the sake of decent worship I would suggest that a whole variety of folk leading individual parts of the service would not necessarily be good for the unity of the liturgy. One or two people would offer a more consistent and whole celebration. But these need not be ordained people. It doesn't take training to set bread and wine apart. It takes the authority of the community, which is to be found in those whose stories are real and in whom the story of Jesus speaks, whose lives seek out the realm of God and the longing of justice. These folk are to be given the authority of the whole people by virtue of how their life and faith journey at that particular time speaks to the whole community and moves it on in a new understanding and experience of Jesus' story.

Still the responsibility for the service of communion and its decency lies with the Kirk Session in a Presbyterian system. And rightly so. Yet within that system it is perfectly possible (and in some instances preferable) that the non-ordained lead the telling of the story and thus the setting apart of the bread and wine.



This is my body

Arguing that the epiclesis is the whole experience of the service leads us to ask what words, if any, guide us and help us experience that. The retelling of the story is certainly the significant moment where holy things are recognised to be already there, it is just that perhaps

we never saw them there before. Imagine God being tucked into breadcrumbs or the whole possible future of justice in the world and the transformation that that may bring *as completely contained in a ruby shimmer skimming across the surface of the wine*. Then the words ‘this is my body ...’ become the invitation to recognise the pervading of the Spirit, the charge of history, the build-up of salvation, the moment when nothing else is in doubt: this bread and this wine are heaven’s food; this meal is the banquet of God’s Reign.

In focusing on these words in the retelling of the story, as we do in all communion liturgies, while the minister or priest holds high the elements and presents them to the congregation, breaking bread in a slow and holy explosion, despite Knox’s aversion to their over-emphasis, it is here where heaven is recognised as connecting with the world. All stories lead to this moment. Not through what is said but because this is where the whole context of the service and the retelling of the story climaxes. This becomes the consecration, blessing and invocation. It all leads here. This is when we recognise the Spirit in the bread and wine when, in us, we recognise what we are witnessing and when everything slips into place. It is an act of the people of God acknowledging, owning and proclaiming what is happening in themselves as a community. This is not an ordained act. This is Jesus’ story. This is our story. This is his body and blood.



The world at the table

Thus the whole design and drama of our worship and its context is the epiclesis and at the moment of breaking all that is recognised. But the context is much wider than the hymn selection and the seating arrangement and the white cloths on the table and pews. It is far more integral to our lives and lifestyle.

When we worship, on the agenda is the whole world: those who live on less than a dollar a day, folk permanently hungry, a world that can only live in the unbalanced way it does for so long, and where climate change and unsustainable living are calling us to a choose an alternative way to build the world. These are the values and programme

we are involved with both as oppressor and oppressed. We attempt to build God's Realm in the heart of these things by transforming and renewing.

The body and blood of Jesus takes us to the heart of these things. It was amid such things Jesus died and rose again. It is without surprise we find we can imagine Jesus in bread queues, seeking a job or a home or a family to belong to, loving the land and longing for it to have jubilee. The bread and wine take us into these stories once more, find us sharing with the folk Jesus loved but the world despised and ignored.⁸ This is the world we long to transform and which Jesus longs to transform too. It is from this context love set Jesus' journey in motion to the cross and beyond.

If this is the world the bread and wine speak into then the drama of the epiclesis sends us to live and be in that world. I have argued that the whole service and its context shapes the epiclesis as it focuses on the breaking of bread. Because it does this, then it doesn't end there, but immediately sends us out into this world once more. When we share bread it is with all these people; that is the context: our neighbour who is sitting beside us as well as our neighbour on some other continent, country or street. It is not so much the identity of the Spirit within the bread and wine but within the purpose and intent of the sacrament that we acknowledge the Spirit's pervading. If epiclesis is the calling upon the Spirit to set apart the bread and wine then this is within the context of the reshaping of the world as God intends. With this line of thought the United Methodists appropriately continue the epiclesis thus: 'Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.'⁹ While the bread and wine are set apart, this is symbolic of the whole community being set apart, to fulfil God's intent for the world.



Conclusion

And so the epiclesis becomes for us the whole experience of the sacrament, not leaving us by the table but sending us back into the world. In enabling God's People to tell the story of the Last Supper

through their own context and experiences the epiclesis rises out of the work of justice and grace and love in the world. Our Reformed words at the traditional epiclesis are ‘and to fulfil your purpose in us’ not in bread and wine but through what this story means and points to. Indeed it is not actually about bread and wine, it is actually about us. This is not an ordained act but one all God’s People must be part of for it is through the intent and hopes of all these people, gathered in pews or in different continents, that bread and wine are set apart and the story comes alive. A place is holy because of the people in it. Bread and wine are set apart because of the longing for God of those people. God already pervades everything. The context, the story teller, the experience of the sacrament from the gathering to the blessing draws out that realisation and recognises the elements as set apart, as any bread and wine is already set apart to tell a story and feed a people and share the presence of Jesus Christ.

The epiclesis is lived everyday. Indeed it is a way of life. We are people of the bread and wine. It’s a lifestyle choice. This is my body ...

- ¹ Second Order for Holy Communion, *Book of Common Order* (3rd ed.; Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2005), 125.
- ² Cyril of Jerusalem, *The Catechetical Lectures* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1838), XXIII.7.
- ³ Gregory Dix, ed., *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition* (2nd ed.; London: SPCK, 1968), 9.
- ⁴ Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (2nd ed.; London, SPCK, 2001), 92 f.
- ⁵ See Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; London: SCM Press, 1965), II.121.
- ⁶ Church Society, http://www.churchsociety.org/issues_new/liturgy/iss_liturgy_epiclesis.asp.

- ⁷ Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (London: Picador, 1988), 1–5.
- ⁸ John Henson, *Other Communion of Jesus: Eating and Drinking the Good News Way!* (Ropley, Hants.: O Books, 2006), 37 f.
- ⁹ “This Holy Mystery,” The United Methodist Church [retrieved on 1 June 2007].



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