

Some Comments About the Communion Service

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THE question which poses itself, immediately and naturally, in connection with the presentation of a different communion service, is, why? We do not lack for a variety of services now. Many would insist that the order to which they are accustomed is entirely satisfactory, although there would not be agreement as to which of these is "the" communion service, since people of different communions are accustomed to very different orders and procedures. In particular, some good church people, not excluding clergymen, would in all likelihood consider it an act of audacity, ranging from outright irreverence to wanton ignorance, for anyone to "tamper" with "the" communion service. It takes but slight reflection, reminding oneself that none of these traditional services dropped from the sky, to consider that orders of service are designed by mortals, and in particular by mortals who happen not to be entirely satisfied with what they have received from the past and who think it time now to make some revisions. Worshippers of the forms of the past did not produce the inheritance we cherish; at best they handed on what their grandfather's produced. Our cherished rituals, whatever they be, were produced by people who were somewhat dissatisfied with what they had received. All the same, we tend to regard received forms with the awe of taboo, as if the churchmen of the Elizabethan age—who, it must be admitted without cavil, enjoyed an unsurpassed skill in cadence and phrasing—, being capable of capital error of judgment at times, possessed timeless infallibility when they turned to the composition of ritual, or as if more recent commissions on ritual, mortal in other respects, possessed skill not of this world and beyond

criticism or revision by subsequent generations, when they turned to tasks of arrangement of ritual and ordinance.

From this it does not follow that previous constructions are unworthy our admiration or use. Quite the contrary, in many cases. Nor does it follow that any new, contemporary effort necessarily merits commendation. What does follow, which is the first point any new effort finds it necessary to establish, is that the attempt to present a revised and somewhat different ritual is not of itself uncalled for. It is of the very stuff of the history of Christianity.

Denominations differ in their regard for the use of original forms and orders. The arguments against experimentation, in favor of doing things "decently and in order," are too obvious to require elaboration, as are the arguments against rigidity, in favor of quenching not the spirit. Suffice to say that each has its advantages and disadvantages. In view of the variety of services available and in use, however, the burden of proof lies in justifying the presentation of still another service; hence this further commentary.

The justifications are found both in history and contemporary circumstances.

Historically the observance of the Lord's Supper was an occasion for thanksgiving, as the word, "eucharist," reminds us. At least, so it seems to have been in the early church. In medieval times, if not much earlier, the eucharist became more and more solemn and fearful. It is properly a solemn event, but that need not mean solemn in the sense of depressing and somber gloom. Yet it is not very evident that most Christians, of whatever communion, look upon their service of the Lord's Supper as fundamentally a thanksgiving. Among the inappropriate developments was that it became a rite to be performed by the priesthood, more than an

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"act" of the whole congregation. Also, it took on alleged magical powers and esoteric qualities, some of which are still reflected in the language of the service in churches where such overtones are quite out of key with their theology and history. It thus became more of a personal and individual matter and less an affirmation of the whole church—congregation and clergy. Also, it came to stress more and more the subject of sin and its cancellation—which followed logically from the foregoing developments—, rather than proclamation and dedication.

Two things, among others, stand out in the Pauline account. First, that what Jesus requested was that this be done in remembrance of him. It would seem that the service ought to retain this focus, which I take it means for us not merely reflection upon the last supper, but upon the whole of Jesus' life, teachings, spirit and sacrifice. The record does not say, do this in remembrance of this supper, but "of me." Second, that when Paul had completed his all too brief account of what he had "received" as the tradition, he added his own statement, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." He saw this act as proclaiming the faith. The view, therefore, which regards the service as a "proclamation" is not without significant precedent. However, I would hold that it should be the faith, as we understand it and find it relevant, not necessarily what Paul singled out, that should be proclaimed. Christians will differ, of course, in precisely what they think constitutes the most important aspects of the faith, but many devout and consecrated Christians do not find what is being proclaimed acceptable or even clear in their communion service.

This brings us to contemporary circumstance, which can never be met with complete satisfaction by the formulations of the distant past.

For clarification it must here be said

that the foregoing observations are not meant to pose objection to the use of any of the various traditional or prescribed services. In other words, the service presented here is not intended to displace another, unless the one in use has been found quite wanting. Particularly it is not intended to replace a service that has been in continuous use and found meaningful. It must always be remembered that in ritual observances the stability and past associations brought out by familiarity are of great value. If some find the content of a service intellectually disturbing, others no doubt either find no such difficulty or have reinterpreted the words as evocative symbols of more relevant meanings. The sophisticated Christian ought surely to find himself spiritually at home in many different forms of worship and sacramental celebration. Perhaps such a service as this might be used on some out of the ordinary occasion—at a church retreat or Maundy Thursday or other vesper worship—to give a different perspective and thereby, possibly, added significance to the customary service. There are other congregations, however, where, there does seem to be need to have a different form, where the communion is simply not as meaningful as it ought to be. My principal justification for this particular service is that devout folk in congregations where it has been used have expressed not only the usual "appreciation," but the view that it seemed more in keeping with their faith, not infrequently accompanied by statements of dissatisfaction with the service to which they were accustomed. As I have indicated, there is historical basis for this dissatisfaction: the customs which developed and the doctrines which came to be articulated departed substantially from earlier practices. What I have attempted is, of course, not to recover or imitate the primitive church, but to recover some ties of continuity with it and with the heritage out of which this sacrament emerged. As is

so often the case, the truly contemporary and relevant need not break with history, but is found by recovery of a better sense of history. This is the difference between being faithful to a heritage and enslaved by the antiquated. The relevant communion, I believe, is found far more adequately by looking at the early church than by alteration of forms and ideas derived from a medieval church.

An example of this is readily pointed up by turning to the pattern which makes of the communion a highly private and individualistic matter. This came about as the sacrament was dispensed from an altar, displacing the idea of a table and a common meal, where the communicant received at the hands of the priest not only the elements, but the right to partake. As this trend intensified, only the wafer was given, despite the gospel statement, "Drink of it, all of you." (Mt. 26:27) Certainly it is clear from all that we know about the early church that it was a celebration of the whole gathering. There is something to be said, whatever form is used, for attempting to recover a sense among the people that this is the whole church in communion and affirming, as a community of faith—not merely a collection of the devout—the shared meanings and devotion as well as one's individual dedication and commitment. In days when our lives tend too much to be fragmented and the ties of community to be mechanistic, the shared life of the church, which is given outward and visible sign in the communion, takes on additional importance.

There are other minor matters, also, which though minor, deserve the minister's serious thought. It must strike some laymen as curious that where the Revised Standard Version of the Bible is used in worship most of the time, on the basis that it is a more accurate and a clearer translation, it should not be used in the communion service. In those Protestant churches where salvation is taught as being by faith, and the sacra-

ment a memorial and symbol, it must seem strange to some to find in their ritual the prayer that they "may be partakers of His most blessed body and blood." Again, I have been in churches where the words, "draw near," harking back to the altar pattern, were used, whereupon the elements were served to the people in the pews. It reminds one of the use of the words, "let all the earth keep silence before him," as a call to worship, followed immediately not by silence but by a very noisome hymn. It cannot but detract in some measure from the integrity of worship to use words that plainly are not meant.

Granted, now, that the literalistic and particularistic examination of language used in worship may be carried to petty extremity, and quite miss the point of the beauty and evocative symbolism so necessary for worship, it is also true that there is a line beyond which liberty with words and meaning becomes a license that is damaging to that sincerity which is even more essential than beauty for authentic faith. Opinions and tastes will differ among devoted Christians as to where such lines fall and what the significance of them is. That need not disturb us. It has, in fact, been the hallmark of the vital pages of Christian history, in contrast with pages of deadly uniformity. It is in recognition of such rich differences of opinion and preference that this service is presented for those who may find it either useful or of interest.

Up to this point no mention has been made of a number of newer services, of different types and to serve various purposes. Many of these have been well conceived, among them the service by Professor Martin Rist, which has found appreciative response. And, again, the presentation of this service is not to displace any of the non-traditional services. The fact that such forms have been created and have found use in the worship of the church strengthens me in the belief that there is a sound basis for the views put forth in these comments.

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