

## Anglican Communion: a Theological Consideration

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The theological crux of the Archbishop of Canterbury's *The Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today: A Reflection for the Bishops, Clergy and Faithful of the Anglican Communion* lies in a specific understanding of Communion and Eucharist that shapes Anglican identity. It seems pressing to address this because the Archbishop's *Reflection* declaredly attempts "to outline the theological framework" for current discussion within the Anglican Communion. It will be my goal to offer an examination of the Archbishop's discussion of Communion and Eucharist in Anglican practice and theology as they are referred to in the *Reflection*. I think it is important for me to point out right away that I am not an Anglican. I am looking at the disputes within the Anglican Communion from the outside and as someone who is still a Roman Catholic but with strong sympathies for the openness of Anglican theological practice. I also research, teach and write about Protestant theology. I have recently been thinking about issues concerned with community and feel that I might have something to contribute to Anglican debate on community at a time when members from all sides of the differences within the Anglican Communion are thinking and praying earnestly about their Church

The Archbishop of Canterbury is a theologian and at the same time he is a manager concerned with the difficulties of corporate decision-making processes. His *Reflection* represents no act of obfuscation on his part: He's not talking about one issue (corporate identity) in order to distract us from another (homosexuality). Even though *Challenge and Hope* is an open document for non-theologians to read the Archbishop has not shunned theological examinations that can be difficult to grasp. Those who are familiar with the Archbishop's theology will recognise what a sympathetic theologian has called his "Difficult Gospel." Rowan Williams may be the head of a multinational corporate body, but that body is a church and as a theologian and priest he sees an intellectual and pastoral duty to address the issues confronting the church in its own terms and these terms are determined by a classically Anglican understanding of Eucharist and Communion. Indeed so significant is this understanding that those who hold to it will see the theological non sequitur of the very idea of a split as a 'Communion.' When the Archbishop cites John 15:16 'You have not chosen me but I have chosen you' he is indicating that membership of the spiritual Communion of Anglicanism is not merely a personal, rational decision that we can make in an Enlightenment sense of being a private individual. If Jesus has chosen us to be members then we are so by the operation of Grace and that is a powerful prerequisite for the operation of our free will in this instance. Grace is just not up to us in the way that the moral decision making of a Kantian free will is up to us and both components are involved in Communion in the Anglican sense.

In order to sort out all these strands that converge in the Archbishop of Canterbury's *Reflection* I shall have to look at the operation of Grace in the Eucharist. I shall also add my own comments to the consideration of Rowan Williams' commentary in which I shall indicate how tenuous any division of the Communion would be from the viewpoint of Anglican understanding on Eucharist and Communion. As Rowan Williams has indicated, the ecumenical dialogues of

the Anglican Communion have led to a keener sense of Anglican self understanding. Knowledge gleaned in this way shows how clearly Anglicans of many different dispositions belong together as a Eucharistic Communion, even without achieving agreement on individual issues.

## **Eucharist in Anglican Understanding**

As with other theological issues, historically the Anglican understanding of Eucharist grew, broadly stated, out of the ambition to reverse what the reformers understood as mistaken medieval accretions to church doctrine. Eucharistic theology has at least two significant loci: on the one hand Eucharist is seen as a connection for us now to Christ's being amongst us as a person in the past, and on the other hand Eucharist also has a communitarian function drawing us together as followers of Christ. The Eucharistic theology of the Middle Ages had seen emphasis placed on the act of consecration as a representation of Christ's presence amongst us, and in the eyes of the reformers there was a consequent loss in the value of the act of communion. A fundamental objection of the reformers was that the Eucharist was being used by the Church to empower itself, thus alienating the laity from the Church. Cranmer emphasized Communion as spiritual nourishment for the life of faith whereas contemporary Roman Catholic theology had moved toward veneration of the consecrated host as a doctrine of the real presence. The reformers argued that this attitude was symptomatic of Medieval theology's emphasis on the veneration of objects to further personal piety ("monkery" as Erasmus decried it) and in place of that the reformers emphasized spiritual nourishment for the community through the act of communion.

Growing out of this Reformation context Anglican theology started out with a distinct emphasis on the Eucharist as an act of communion. With time Anglican theology found definite room to embrace both sides of this debate with Catholic Anglicans even accepting veneration of the consecrated Host in benediction which had once been very much disparaged. Both sides of this understanding exist within Anglican theology today as they do within the theology of Roman Catholicism and that of some Anglicanism's Lutheran and other ecumenical partners. The span of this theology in Anglicanism is represented by benediction at one end of the spectrum and lay presidency at the other. Anglicanism does not expect unanimity on either of these practices but as a general and historical point of consensus the Eucharist as an act of communion holds Anglicans together. Since the 1930's, gradual changes in liturgical practice have meant that Anglicans in the pews have experienced more emphasis on Eucharist on a Sunday, thus fulfilling the goals of the early reformers.

When Rowan Williams talks about "what the word 'Communion' means for Anglicans" he acknowledges that "it is a vision that has taken clearer shape in many of our ecumenical dialogues." Anglicanism has come to understand more about itself and its theology of 'Communion' through its ecumenical discussions with other churches. This is a crucial point in the *Reflection* because 'Communion'

is the word holding Anglicanism together and Anglican Eucharistic theology lies at the centre of this unifying issue. What has remained in Anglicanism of these early days of the Reformation is the continuing emphasis on Eucharist as spiritual nourishment for the community of faith. The connection between Community and Eucharist can be understood best by looking closely at how Eucharist operates as spiritual nourishment, or in other words how Eucharist is effective through Grace in the community of believers.

### **The Operation of Grace: Towards a Communitarian Ideal**

The way in which we construe the functioning of the Eucharist best explains the interrelationship between the community and the Eucharist. Anglican theology under the guidance of Richard Hooker (d. 1600) long emphasized the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist as dependant on the faithfulness of the communicant. This approach to Eucharist, known as 'receptionism,' argued that Christ was present in the elements (bread and wine) of the consecrated Eucharist in a spiritual sense, so long as the recipient accepted that gift in faith. Hooker argued that the sacraments were not absolute and unconditional causes of grace; in other words the sacraments did not provide spiritual nourishment to the recipient on their own just through being sacraments. For Hooker and consequent Anglican theology, even if the offer of grace was unconditional the acceptance of the sacramental gift depended on the free and faithful response of the recipient. In this sense the consecration could not be seen as separate from the use of the elements of the Eucharist. Even when the Tractarians turned towards a Roman Catholic understanding of the Eucharist in the nineteenth century, they still saw the manner of the presence of Christ in the elements as spiritual. For the Tractarians the presence of Christ no longer depended on the worthy recipient. Instead the blessing of Grace would only be bestowed on the recipient who took the sacrament in faith. This is indeed a subtle distinction from Hooker's original construal but it brings up an important characteristic of Anglican theology that has so far permitted such different attitudes to the Eucharist to exist side by side.

Already in Hooker's time Anglicans reached agreement about the place of authority in theological disputes. Anglican theologians thought that it was absolutely in order to remain sceptical about the theological point of the manner of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Is it still bread when it is the Body of Christ? Is it bread again after the Communion is over? Such fine distinctions were not necessary articles of faith and could be left open as matters of theological opinion. This leaves Anglicans with a spectrum of understandings of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The Archbishop of Canterbury refers humorously to this rather tenuous notion of authority at the outset of his *Reflection* when he indicates that whereas others have made their mind up on the issues of women bishops and gay bishops "the Church of England is not sure (as usual)." The Tractarians had recognised how challenging such open debate on theological matters could be to those not accustomed to that kind of theological disputation and they had recommended that such theological disputes not be brought into public debate. In

the Tracts 80 and 87 Isaac Williams defended what he called "Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge" with the intention not to disturb those who were ill equipped to engage in theological debate. Though tempting in the face of present difficulties, it would be futile and misguided to yearn for a return to such Victorian sensibilities regarding public debate on theological matters. By publishing *The Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today* Rowan Williams has addressed the reality of open public debate in our times and he has attempted to steer that debate more towards the core issue of the Church in Communion as the Body of Christ.

The authority of theological positions held in Roman Catholicism is quite different and has definite appeal against the background of open dispute in the Anglican Communion. Carefully considered theological papers known as encyclicals spell out very precisely what the position of the Roman Catholic Church is on any given matter. Publishing theologians in the Roman Catholic Church will use quotes from encyclicals to bolster arguments. I was able to observe this practice at a recent theological conference in Leeds and it reminded of the time I had spent using the work of literary and philosophical scholars from East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Whether the material required it or not these scholars would refer to the core texts of Marxism-Leninism as if they were the touchstones of truth that gave them permission to talk about the material they were really examining. For the most thoughtful colleagues their references to Marxism-Leninism were mere lip-service to an authoritarian regime that required such obeisance. Authority that is merely asserted can survive only so long as the system that supports it continues to assert itself. Such apparent authority can be comforting and an anchor but assertions of authority carried out in this manner appear empty to me. The whole edifice based on this apparent authority came tumbling down once it was seriously challenged. All human institutions and ideas are complex and fraught with human failings and hopefully none can count as the last word; certainly I include this paper when I say that. The Archbishop's tentative theological suggestions clearly lack such asserted authority and Anglican 'Catholicity' is not that of "a completely international and universal institution like the Roman Catholic Church." Consequently the Anglican identity that grows out of such tentatively asserted theological positions may, in the words of Rowan Williams, indeed be "fragile" and "provisional" by its very nature. Anglican identity melds in an Anglican sense of all embracing Catholicity drawn together by a "global sacramental fellowship" of Anglicans receiving Communion faithfully together. Even St. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa* was ready to acknowledge Boethius who said that "proof from authority is the weakest form of proof." The Archbishop of Canterbury's position stands out for its intellectual integrity and honesty.

When Anglican theology emphasized Eucharist as Communion rather than the personal individual encounter with the real presence it started a path of encounter with the Eucharist that has continued to the present emphasis on Communion as prefiguring the heavenly banquet. There is an ideal here of a Communing Church as the Body of Christ. This Communion is the gift of Grace from God and also the ultimate gift of self from Jesus that He has chosen to share

with us.

One of the reasons I wanted to spend some time thinking about the *Reflection* is that I have just completed work on a book about community. It's a rather dry work on philosophical and moral issues surrounding the German theologian Schleiermacher's fragmentary consideration of secular social ideals of community. I argue that Schleiermacher abandoned work on this issue because he became distracted by what he saw as the more significant questions surrounding ideal religious—today we might say spiritual—community. Before he abandoned this secular work he left us with a rather tantalizing notion of freedom that dictated that we have a responsibility in the secular world to test the limits our community will permit in terms of freedom. We have to push at the edges and then come back so that we can be participating members of the community that should be tested in this way in order to be all it is capable of. Thus the community would permanently be in a state of becoming. As a minister in the Reformed Church Schleiermacher did not have the benefit of Anglican Eucharistic community and his religious ideal communities followed the path to God without explicit reference to Eucharist. But for Schleiermacher too the path towards the heavenly banquet was through community with others. The step away from the solipsism of self was towards others and the step onward to God was another, analogous step.

The Anglican Eucharist is similarly a celebration and prefiguring of the coming heavenly banquet. God offers that sacramental gift freely and by accepting the gift in faith, the Anglican communicant draws closer to the Body of Christ; each individual draws as close as he or she can in order to become part of that Body of Christ. This sacramental fellowship is the theological glue of the Anglican Communion. The Anglican Eucharistic Community is also the point of identity from which Anglicanism reaches out to other Christians as a function of what Anglicanism sees as its ecumenical responsibility drawn from Anglicanism's sense of Catholicity.

If Schleiermacher was right about secular political issues, then there we do have a responsibility to test the limits of social political institutions and it seems that some members of the Anglican Communion have done so in their impatience for change. After all, politics and secular considerations are involved in what it means to be Church too. And yet the Eucharistic Community exists and Grace is still a gift freely given. I suppose it just remains to see how Grace may operate in the future and whether there is any theological reality to the suggestions of a two tiered community. From a theological perspective the ecumenical dialogues of the Anglican Communion indicate that there is really only one Body of Christ and one corporate act of Communion.

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