

# HOLY COMMUNION AND THE RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH

## A DRAFT PAPER

By Peter Donald

### 1. The context of the debate

1.1. “What is distinctive about Christian community derives in part from the act of Communion at its heart, the vivid and compelling presence of Christ in the midst of his Church, the quality of sharing implied in the actions and symbols of Communion, and the pattern of community offered to the world which anticipates the perfect sharing in the Kingdom of God ...” This excerpt from the report of the Panel on Worship in 2005 stimulated the formation of a Working Group on the place and practice of Holy Communion, comprising a range of voices attentive both to current practice and thinking within our own Church and more widely than that. We have sought to understand the central place which the Sacrament holds within the life of the church, and to interrogate the range of practices which accompany its celebration. We wish to uphold Holy Communion as key to our mission and a source of constant renewal to us as Christian people.

1.2 The resources available on this subject are vast though, interestingly, not voluminous in the recent history of our Church. The place and practice of the Sacrament has been of huge significance since the days of the early church, underpinning of course well-known scriptural texts and the substance of some of the earliest writings outside the canon. Differences of opinion and order have frequently surfaced in church history, since early days and not merely at the time of the Reformation. A rich diversity of rites developed in both East and West, and reforming spirits long before the nomenclature of Protestant was coined addressed themselves to the issues in hand. Theologians elaborated on the meaning of sacramental practice, and Prosper of Aquitaine coined a most famous reflection on this as early as the fifth century: “look at the sacred witness of the public priestly prayers which, handed down by the apostles, are celebrated in the same way in all the world and in every catholic church, so that the rule of praying should establish the rule of believing”.<sup>1</sup> And so theology has regularly seen as its task to be reflection on the worshipping life of the church; and, with reciprocity, insofar as liturgical resources and practices have been developed, it has been thought utterly important to align how we pray with what we think and believe. Yet, in more recent decades in the Church of Scotland, in respect of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, there has been rather less with regard to articulated theological reflection than movement in the construction of liturgical<sup>2</sup> patterns and practice.

1.3 It is constructive then to consider how the Reformed tradition in which our Church stands might lend direction to our thinking. The centrality of the Sacraments was affirmed powerfully, and with high stakes (literally), through the period of the Reformation. The actors and thinkers in the sixteenth century both built on their inheritance and set out some self-consciously novel ways of proceeding. This was fuelled both negatively and positively. The perceived idolatry of the Mass was to be shunned, and likewise the customs of its ritual. Bread and wine were to be understood as signs and symbols, although that point alone caused many and great debates even amongst the Reformers on its definition. Communion was to be a communal action, not of the priest or presbyter alone but of the people gathering together; and there was to be such Communion frequently, which had not previously been the case. There was a great flow of theological and liturgical publications, picking up on everything from the preparation of the communicants through to their posture when the bread and wine were shared. For Scotland, the order in English prepared by John Knox for exiles in Geneva, and a matching order in Gaelic prepared by John Carswell in the early years of the Scottish Reformation, gave full and sound direction on the rule of prayer. The Scots Confession gave the authoritative interpretation. It was never intended to be the case that prayers absolutely followed the same wording at every time and in every place, but there was a “common order”, a holding together of strands both theological and liturgical.

1.4 Orthodox and Catholic church traditions of liturgy, once established in local churches, have tended to vary not very much over centuries. It would be possible to exaggerate this point, in that changes over time have been more momentous than is sometimes recognised, but there is certainly a contrast with Reformed church history. There was a sense in which floodgates opened when the Western church became so fissured through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Both the scope of theological reflection and the ordering of worship produced something like a new world in which, for all the apparent points of overlap between one worshipping congregation and another, and one theologian and another, the variety became

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in G. Lathrop, “Knowing something a little: on the role of the *lex orandi* in the search for Christian unity”, in T.F. Best and D. Heller (eds.), *So we believe, so we pray* (WCC, Geneva, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Liturgy/liturgical refers not merely to set *forms* of worship but firstly simply to the “work” of praising God, by forms and extempore.

very considerable indeed. Whereas geography and degrees of relative isolation historically had always produced variation, the possibilities now were of great differences even within a small town or rural area. Authority continued to be located for the most part in the hands of a few, usually the ordained, but in its becoming dispersed so widely, the notion of an accountability crossing time and space, i.e. for the church to be “one, holy, catholic and apostolic”, undoubtedly was diluted. In Scotland, although there were to-ings and fro-ings in the direction of General Assemblies of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it was the wars of religion in these islands, in the mid-seventeenth century, which most obviously affected the common ordering of worship and the boundaries of theological reflection. The authors of the Westminster Directory of 1644 indeed were deliberately less specific than their sixteenth-century predecessors with the result that, as far as can be told (the evidence is not always as rich as might be wished), various patterns of celebrating the Sacrament of Holy Communion emerged in the Church of Scotland subsequent to that.<sup>3</sup> Judgement is reserved on whether this was good or bad, at this point, not least since there is no justifiable case for maintaining adherence to a single form of liturgy for all time – no church has ever attempted to do such a thing – but the ground was being laid nevertheless for what nowadays is a complex situation, simply within our own local context. Even if a relatively settled pattern was adhered to in most Church of Scotland parishes, in both worship and theology – for which a case could be made historically – the bar on innovation has been remarkably unrigid.

1.5 The degree of variation in regard of the Lord’s Supper within the Church of Scotland was probably not so great until the later nineteenth century. The explosion of hymn writing and the nineteenth-century liturgical movements on the one hand, the ferment of change caused by secessions and especially the Disruption on the other and, allied with this, the range of post-Enlightenment theological exploration gave a background to a range of patterns being explored. While printings began once again of prayers, culminating in the *Book of Common Order* in 1940, both local church traditions and ministerial preferences – the Minister being solely trusted under church law with the conduct of public worship – dictated what precisely happened. The pace of experimentation has been quickening through the twentieth century. Nowadays we have our third version of *Common Order*, and in addition an inclination amongst many to make sense for themselves what conduces to good worship. A wide range of resources can be drawn upon. The ordination vow to uphold the forms of worship as authorised in the Church is far from defined in its scope. Alongside the “McDonaldisation” of society has come, very especially in a Reformed church like ours, a pick and mix mentality with regard to worship possibilities. It is within this context that this paper sets out to make its points.

1.6 The undoubtedly rich potential of having options for reforming and ever reforming<sup>4</sup>, of modernising and appealing to contemporary taste, of maintaining historic traditions or deliberately trying to sit free of them, is arguably one of the attractions of the Church of Scotland. The spirit of our forebears, who preached so passionately against the dry reading of forms of worship with too little regard as to how much they edified, has been truly honoured. The challenge, nevertheless, lies in the questions which are to be raised about accountability. By this is meant not so much accountability to some subordinate earthly authority – although these, such as Presbytery and General Assembly, have their rightful place within our constitutional framework – as accountability before the throne of grace. If the historic tradition of the church read its Scripture well and professed, with enduring rightness, the unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity of the church brought into being by the Word and sustained by the Holy Spirit to the glory of God the Father, i.e. the church of Jesus Christ, which has priority over any notion of the “Church of Scotland”, then there is an arbitration somewhere along the line of our Church of Scotland patterns by that vision and calling. Attentive to the way the wind blows, or the Spirit moves, we cannot then but enter into dialogue both with one another – with our fellow-Christians within our own Church establishment – and with our fellow-Christians wherever we find them, in time and in space. History is part of our ecumenical future, as is the church worldwide, and such an ambitious drawing of the household of faith is ignored at our detriment. To put it concretely, and in reference to the present subject at issue, how do our celebrations of the Lord’s Supper link us truly with the body of Christ, in every sense in which that is to be understood? Or negatively, it could be asked, as Paul was obliged to challenge the Corinthians, is it at times not the Lord’s Supper that we eat (cf. I Corinthians 11.20)?

---

<sup>3</sup> Before 1645, there had been successive printings of Knox’s *Common Order*, presumably in answer to demand, but not once thereafter. The Westminster Directory specified much more for the Lord’s Supper liturgy than for anything else. The Westminster Confession of Faith of course also made significant mention of the Sacrament, which in terms of Christian education has continued to be useful.

<sup>4</sup> There are strengths here, but note always the clear distinction between the perceived need to innovate and the Reformed principle of *semper reformanda*, which means literally “always needing to be reformed”, i.e. to be shaped more in the likeness of Christ. There may be overlap, or not.

## 2 The aims of this report

2.1. The Working Group has set out to study the place and practice of the Lord's Supper for the sake of the renewal of the church. There is no interest here in making partisan points, or in narrowing down what is positive about diversity in practice. It is a matter of delight that for all the historic practice of the Sacrament in the Church of Scotland settled for some centuries on relatively infrequent celebrations, nowadays it is as common as not that in parishes, and in settings both formal and informal, celebrations are happening quite often. But still a sense of urgency has lain behind the task in hand. Why is it that in the one Church we clearly experience celebrations so different that they can be felt to be alienating or incomplete; and doubts that they are celebrations? The cause may be variation in wording and/or style, so how does this matter? And why is it that so much energy can appear to be invested in the communication of the Word without so much enthusiasm for the dispensing of the Sacrament?<sup>5</sup> But even more critically than this – and this is a point which has lived with the Working Group since its establishment – why does the church offer such a mixed message regarding the communion at the heart of its life when in contemporary society food and drink attract such attention yet thanksgiving in faith is unfashionable, when loneliness abounds, inequalities only grow, suffering is patent, death is feared? Do we not as church carry a gospel, good news, to the world, and not least the society in which we play our part? The time is ripe, as it has been since Jesus instituted the feast, for us not only to pray and listen to the Word but also to break bread when we come together as church.

2.2. What follows here is a range of points relevant to consideration of the place and practice of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in the Church of Scotland today. The hope is that such a report can both support and critique our common life. There is no intention therefore to try to say everything – though indeed such a plan would be in vain in any case; the riches of the Sacrament literally far outpass human telling – since reflection on the meaning of Holy Communion ranges very widely. The hope rather has been to be discerning in relation to regular experience.

2.3 In addition, and very much on the back of the methodology adopted by the Working Group, a separate publication has been prepared which offers a theological and practical commentary on the first Order of the Communion service in the 1994 publication, *Common Order*. The purpose of this is not to make a judgement about the quality of that particular Order, but to use it as a tool, a means of explicating what happens through Communion worship. This will be of use in the equipping of ordained ministers and also of interest, we hope, to any others who might care to study it. Thus it is in parallel with work already published by the Saint Andrew Press in 2005 in relation to the standard Order for the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, entitled *By Water and the Spirit*. Nothing has changed in respect of our Church's self-understanding about forms and particular orders of worshipping – they give direction but not prescription – but for the sake both of addressing confusions and building positively on our worshipping heritage, these liturgical commentaries are timely. Furthermore, in addition to this Report and the liturgical commentary, plans are in hand for more visual and interactive tools to aid the understanding of the place and practice of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

## 3 The "place" of the Lord's Supper

3.1 Jesus shared meals with his friends on many occasions. Of the Evangelists, John would take us into the hills near to the time of Passover, with a multitude in attendance; Matthew, Mark and Luke would take us especially to the Upper Room, a more intimate coming together. When the apostle Paul had to berate the Corinthians on aspects of their practice, he clearly understood that the church assembled for its communal prayers and eating, and it was not each in their own houses.<sup>6</sup> Thus from the earliest sources, as well as subsequent evidence in writing, art and architecture, we are invited to have a sense of the geography of the Lord's Supper. And so this is one aspect, though not the only one, of how we might reflect on the "place" of the Sacrament.

3.2 Church traditions have gone in many ways with this. Great and impressive edifices and the finest art and the most glittering gold has been thought fitting for the celebrations, but so too have open-air spaces and quiet corners. Furnishings have been generously donated and sometimes also have become the cause of very heated disputes. Long before the current wave of debate about pews, the ordering of church buildings simply in our own Church had definite schools of thought about how to build around the placing of Communion table(s), or not.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary experience, then, offers room for reflection on a multitude of

---

<sup>5</sup> Is it a sign of this that in the major report *Church without Walls*, and in its follow-up events currently in train, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper barely gets a mention, let alone a celebration?

<sup>6</sup> John ch.6; Matthew 26. 17ff., Mark 14.12 ff, Luke 22.7ff; I Corinthians 11.17ff.

<sup>7</sup> A single Communion table permanently up at the front may have been a reintroduction for the Church of Scotland in the nineteenth century, but of course it had long pedigree elsewhere. Its symbolic

possibilities, including more and more informal settings of the Sacrament, whether in nursing homes or retreat centres, as well as in designed church buildings.<sup>8</sup> The simple and enduring point to be made here is that the Sacrament is an occasion for an assembly, a gathering. We come, we share food, we go. Where the meal is served matters less than the fact it is served, and there is companionship (which means, literally, a sharing of the bread) in the event.

3.3 That obviously then raises the question as to when such a meal is offered. It is well known that many of the early Reformers took the view that it should be a weekly event, the rhythm of a Sunday – and by that, not especially on what had in the “unreformed” church been known as Feast Days.<sup>9</sup> When the compromise was made, in Scotland as in elsewhere, that a less frequent celebration was in order for practical reasons, the early determination in the *First Book of Discipline* was still to make it a pattern of regular ordinariness, i.e. the first Sunday of March, June, September and December. As in some places churches have moved to more frequent celebrations, and with often less hesitancy than our forebears about the dangers of “superstition” in the observance of particular days in the church year, it is still rare within the Church of Scotland to have a weekly celebration. The arguments raised for this around the time of the publication of the 1979 edition of *The Book of Common Order* did not apparently gain much approval, and it remains to be seen whether there will be alteration here. It is of interest that Catholic and Anglican practice has very majorly shifted during the course of the twentieth century towards a weekly celebration in which the members of the parish fully participate.

3.4 If a substantial reflection were to begin here, it would be in the nature of considering how the celebration of the Sacraments complete or bring to a fullness the preaching of the Word. The sharing of the gospel of salvation – as we read in Scripture – has its climax in the proclamation of the death of Jesus Christ and his rising again. As well as clearly shaping the writing of the four Gospels, and much of the New Testament, such was also the overwhelming focus of the ecumenical creeds in the early centuries of the church and in a great deal of preaching and theological writing ever since. Why therefore come up short in, as Paul would put it, proclaiming the Lord’s death until he comes (I Corinthians 11.26)? Can the celebration of the Sacrament, touching as it does human experience beyond the power of words and, as we would understand it, taking us into the richest experience of bodily communion, not reinforce the eloquence or otherwise of the preacher of the day?

3.5 In connection with this question about the place of the Lord’s Supper within the life of the Church are issues also to do with participation. Whenever the Sacrament is celebrated, it has become a church tradition, building no doubt on that extended berating text of I Corinthians 11, for there to be care taken as to the spirit in which one should sit down at the table. There have been a variety of practices here, for example disciplines of catechesis, of initiation, of fasting, of the confession of sin (and in some churches, the order of penance). The place of the Lord’s Supper has been very highly conceived, with the insistence on the part of church authority that it should not be contemned, taken for granted in any sense. Historically within our own Church, and of course still mostly in the Highlands, disciplines of preparation have been focused in worship services in advance of the Sunday celebration. This all comes into play in debate about frequency, and further in considerations of how suited a Communion service is as a missionary parish in 21<sup>st</sup> century Scotland seeks week by week to draw in the newcomer. It also figures in our estimation of the role of Elders and Minister in visiting the congregation especially at Communion seasons, and the questions around the hangover of Communion cards as a succession to the tokens once issued only to those judged worthy to participate.

3.6 What then is the spirit of participation? The Church has had continuing discussions as to what membership implies.<sup>10</sup> In that first recorded occasion of difficulties within a congregation, the Corinthians were obliged to think about the meaning of unworthiness, in regard of their Communion practice. There were stern words about the humiliation of the less well off; there were warnings about divine judgement precisely because there was too much human judging going on. Participation, in the Greek *koinonia*, which is itself sometimes translated as “communion”, refers fundamentally to that which is in common. If that Corinthian situation gave out warnings about the setting up of wealth hierarchies, the principle to be extended is that the place of the Lord’s Supper is a place where all boundaries are broken down in Christ. The body of Christ in which we share is the place for encounter of the richest kind; we meet one another in love, and love

---

value, even empty, should not be underestimated – witness its deliberate absence, for example in certain hospital sanctuaries for the sake of being inclusive towards all faiths.

<sup>8</sup> Our parallel enterprise of reflecting on theological issues in the re-ordering of church buildings (*This place is wicked*: working title), takes up some of these issues more fully. Another separate piece of work in progress is the recording of Communion vessels across the whole of the Church.

<sup>9</sup> The law of the late medieval church was that people were to take Communion at least once a year, and Pascha or Easter was regularly the preferred time.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the report of the Panel on Doctrine (“Measuring membership”, 2002), and continuing present work under the auspices of the Mission and Discipleship Council.

transforms us, the love of Christ, who gave himself for us. The spirit of participation then is humility and thanksgiving, openness to God and to one another.

3.7 Thus understood – and before we get to any questions about what the bread and wine convey – the Sacrament is truly a celebration. The early Reformers in more commonly talking about the Sacrament to be “administered” no doubt were focusing on the point of the leader of worship, the Minister, not taking it solely for himself (*sic*, at that time) but giving it to the people, who would give the bread and wine on to one another<sup>11</sup>; nowadays, the notion of “administration” carries different overtones and is not so helpful in this context. Celebration speaks of the giftedness of the church assembly, that any and all might come together in faith “to taste and see how gracious the Lord is”.

3.8 Are there some who should not participate? The answer would seem to be yes and no. If the required spirit implies taking seriously such disciplines of preparation as are helpful and so coming around the table with a readiness to love as we have been loved, then clearly there are situations and circumstances where an individual will not be there without the danger of hypocrisy. The love of God is poured out upon us with an astounding measure of forgiveness but such forgiveness, with God’s judgement of sin lying behind it, is no more to be taken for granted than the invitation to sit down and eat. Where there is no thankfulness, where there is no determination likewise to be forgiving, where there is no anticipation of the love of God accompanying us further on our life’s journey, where there is no readiness to work with God for the overcoming of evil (we draw here on the latter parts of the Lord’s Prayer and its influence both on Scripture and subsequent Christian theology), then participation is sham. God’s love is turned away from, and the understanding of being “in Christ” is words only. In the lovely though now slightly archaic-sounding notion of the Lord’s Supper being a “converting ordinance”, there is the idea that the Supper, and our participation in it, turns us to Christ. None of us are worthy to sit at the table, but there is the invitation which comes from the Lord himself. It is an invitation to everyone, but we would dishonour our host if we come prepared to ignore him.

3.9 The place of the Lord’s Supper, then, is that it is infinitely more than a religious ritual. Attendance is not something to be ticked off, as if turning up for school; a ticket is not to be presented as if to be a spectator at a football match where there is not a care which side wins. There is absolutely implied a preparation and a follow-on, as well as the event itself. Regularly, preparation is about more than the work of a few in preparing the space and the food and the vessels; for all concerned, the word, and silence, of encounter with God makes us ready. And follow-on is where the loveliest articulations of the vision of the Sacrament – where all are fed, and joined in company with the saints in heaven and on earth, and we await Christ’s coming again – feed into our living between the times. A scholar in a very different geographical context put it like this: beware of “Sunday Christians who steal chickens on Mondays”.<sup>12</sup> The kingdom work and witness continues where there is no table there to remind us of it.

3.10 There should, therefore, be no sense that the Lord’s Supper is purely for Christians, a religious sideshow so to speak. This point might be illustrated thus. We live in a world where there is a great deal of concern about religious hatred, where suspicions abound around those who profess a faith of any kind. At the heart of the Lord’s Supper, and the life which is nurtured by it, is not assertiveness, but an appeal and an example – the opposite of Christian bullshiness. We are not invited to a crusade but to incarnate the power of the suffering Christ. Or, we live in a world where the questions about lifestyle become ever more pressing. In view of global warming, for example, or what conduces to long life, there is all manner of advice which is given. Around the Lord’s Supper, and the lives which draw from it, is a teaching about community, about self-restraint and sharing, no matter what threats lie ahead. Or, reckoning with the massive challenges facing a world where there is so much poverty and unrelieved suffering, and wars and rumours of wars, it is around the Lord’s Supper and the lives which sing songs of praise that there is a building of courage, a sowing of visions, a glorious path on which to follow until death is no more. Fed by our Lord and Saviour we should have everything to give, as we have had so much given to us. At the event of the meal, there is and should be (as there has been so often through church history) giving for the sake of the poor and the vulnerable around us, and as we in fact all of us are vulnerable, still as we go out from the assembly we may be strong.

3.11 What is the church? So-called “*communio* ecclesologies” centre the understanding of the nature of the church around the place of the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist, as it is called after the Greek word for thanksgiving. These are somewhat foreign to the Reformed church tradition in which we find ourselves, with the rationale being that our own tradition has tended to emphasise much more the event of God’s encounter with His people and has been suspicious of suggestions that God’s blessing is guaranteed in earthly forms,

---

<sup>11</sup> Christ being the host of the meal, the tradition almost certainly continued through the Reformation of the Minister serving himself first. Cf. for example Westminster Confession of Faith, ch. xxix; Richard Baxter, *The Reformation of the Liturgy* (1661). Variation set in later ....

<sup>12</sup> C. Giraud, “The Eucharist as *diakonia*: from the service of cult to the service of charity”, p. 132 in K. Pecklers (ed.), *Liturgy in a postmodern world* (London: Continuum, 2003)

be it church or sacraments of the church. Debate continues (!), but a closing remark on the place of the Lord's Supper in today's Church of Scotland would be to raise the question as to how integrated we are as a church in this regard. Reflection on this would need to consider both the place of celebrations within regular church life, be it in parish, chaplaincy or wherever (including of course fresh patterns of church<sup>13</sup>) and also its significance on occasions of church courts, whether in meetings for "business" or for admissions to membership, ordinations, the opening or closing of church buildings and the like. Are Word and Sacrament held together as closely as they deserve to be? Are we drawing as fully as we are invited to on the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit? The word "business" is to be put in inverted commas lest the Church be sucked into a mentality of only functioning efficiently and getting its jobs done, perhaps not for monetary profit but nevertheless as a complex organisation. For the body of Christ, wherever Christians come together, there are strong arguments for there being the richest of encounters one with another and with God, which Word and Sacrament together exist to enable.

#### 4 The practice of the Lord's Supper

4.1 The practical theology of Holy Communion aims at doing more than giving a series of hints and tips. The task is to encourage critical assessment of practice in the Church which gives weight both to the spoken word and to what is seen and done, in the light of the faith underpinning the Communion service. How will Christ make himself known to us in the breaking of the bread (cf. Luke 24.35)?

4.2 Scripturally the practical focus lies around the blessing and breaking of the bread which is then given to those around the table – and then, on the back of that, come a whole set of questions which can be variously answered, from the type of bread to the means of serving and much else besides. Rather than name all the possible options of practice, it suffices to note that behind these lie historic patterns which we might interrogate theologically. Much may be found to have its basis above all in local preferences, which is neither good nor bad but at the very least permissible to vary. Of course, sometimes the sense that it has always been done in a certain way is a restraining barrier to change which could be helpful; yet on the other hand, a regularity of pattern, and understanding why certain patterns are used and not others, can serve the depth of the mystery at hand. It is this last point which should most help us as we reflect and debate: the heart of the Lord's Supper comes as we celebrate the mystery of faith – "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again".

4.3 Thus, leading considerations will be how to prepare for, how to acknowledge and how to go out rejoicing in the blessing of Christ in our midst. The mystery as one Biblical writer put it is the unfolding of God's purposes "to unite all things in him" (cf. Ephesians 1.10). To follow in the line of the letter to the Ephesians, the pouring out of God's grace is a message of reconciliation, of the breaking down of fundamental barriers between ourselves and God, and nothing must be allowed to conceal that. Those who understand their calling see the need for "all lowliness and meekness ... patience, forbearing one another in love, [to be] eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4.2-3). Can this be seen in the words and the actions of local celebrations? Does the measure of formal ritual, for example, support or detract from our freedom to praise God and to be richly blessed in our companionship with one another? What is the relative importance of certain words and music and silence, of dress codes and seating arrangements, in this light? Are we caught up in a dying historical tradition or a counter-cultural, joy-filled anticipation of the One who makes all things new?

4.4 Our understanding of Christ's coming as inaugurating the new covenant, the transformation of minds and hearts, pulls apart inevitably the limitations of our ingrained horizons of thought and action. To that extent the knowledge of Christ's love is unsettling at the same time as it is hope-filling: it is not for us to remain the same. This point, as much as any, warns against conservatism in style and approach, lest we settle too readily in our comfort zones. Without taking this argument too far – it is not the case, for example, that we have no recognisable landmarks as we journey on; it is not for us to manufacture something so novel that we completely abandon all that is inherited<sup>14</sup> – there is counsel here for openness to the new. The congregation which always sang "Ye gates" may modify its pattern, for example, or ways of serving Communion may alter.... How best will Christ's love, and our adoption and being joined in the outreach of that love, be expressed?

---

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the current work of the Mission and Discipleship Council in promoting general reflection on "fresh patterns".

<sup>14</sup> Gordon Lathrop's reflections on what may be called the *ordo* of Christian worship merit attention – "The Lima Liturgy and beyond: moving forward ecumenically", in T.F. Best and D. Heller (edd.), *Eucharistic Worship in ecumenical contexts* (Geneva, 1998).

4.5 One point which exercised the Working Group in this connection related to the participation of children in the Sacrament.<sup>15</sup> Though adults, or at least most of those present, may have become familiar with aspects of local practice, children, less habituated, may bring the gift – as in the Passover ritual – of asking why? And as that is allowed, are we able to respond using language that can be grasped while still holding the mystery? And will we take it beyond words, dismantling barriers of age and understanding (and so happily admitting that we are all learners), for example by mixing adults and children together in the serving of the bread and wine? The opening here is not merely for liturgy, however, important though our patterns of worship are, but continues, as has already been noted, when the celebration of the Sacrament impacts upon all of our living. Children have their place both in preparation and in follow-on, in giving as well as receiving.<sup>16</sup> Permissive legislation has already been passed on the admission of children to Communion, but perhaps its full implications have not been sufficiently recognised. As we have been baptized into the body of Christ, so the Church has a task of drawing out the gifts of her people and bringing all towards maturity. We have to ponder the undesirability of closing doors to any within the covenant at the point when, in Communion, our togetherness with Christ is most perfectly sealed.

4.6 Words play a signal role within the Sacrament, in conjunction with actions. There will be singing, sometimes of the prayers as well as of psalms and hymns. And there will be silence, perhaps lengthy silence (though in past practice, now more commonly laid aside, it used to be that there would be a reading of Scriptural texts during the Communion meal; and in some places now, there is music or singing). On the guiding principles of all of this, the *Common Order* tradition has been to harvest both liturgical texts from the long ago and contemporary patterns of the poetry of prayer. There is much to be said for this, since it signals our belonging to the communion of saints who have gone before us while also intimating our present-day anticipation of the joys of heaven. Some will be inclined to lean most heavily on historic wordings, and others less so. Doubtless there is a need for discernment here, based on awareness of the meanings being conveyed; reference to our liturgical commentary may be of help here.

4.7 There are some key moments which, in the minds of some, might determine a need for absolute adherence to particular forms of wording and which in any case must be attended to. The words of institution (drawing primarily on I Corinthians 11) are a case in point. Every service in any book of order the Church of Scotland has produced has included the Institution. Rooting us, through the imagination, with the earliest days of Christian believers and shaping our own imagination of living, and derived from a context where good practice was under threat, it is hard to downplay its function, even if we might have cause to differ with the understanding, in the Roman Catholic Church, that these words in themselves consecrate the elements of bread and wine and are therefore of uttermost importance within the liturgy. We might tend to use alternative forms cautiously and with good reason, but there is no uniquely priestly moment here. And then there is the related matter of invoking the Holy Spirit. Eastern church tradition, less inclined to single out a part of the liturgy as mattering more than any other part, has weighed in on this during recent ecumenical exchanges. The tradition of the “epiclesis”, the invocation of the Holy Spirit upon both worshippers and gifts of bread and wine, in terms of balance rightly deepens the Trinitarian dimension in the eucharistic ritual.<sup>17</sup> As Christ is giving himself, so our prayers depend on the Holy Spirit as we are made receivers of his body and blood. The Reformed theologian John Calvin, for all that he moved away from prescribed verbal formulae (the words of institution excepted, as a warrant for the meal), nevertheless was clear that it was by the efficacy of the Holy Spirit that we might enjoy Christ and all his blessings.<sup>18</sup> Our liturgy and lives will be incomplete if we work simply on our own.

4.8 So far, it may be noticed, we have held back from articulating an interpretation of what exactly happens in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, although certain points are very much linked with that. Given the depth of controversy on this both historically and in the present day between churches, there is no catch-all option here. The teaching in both the Scots Confession of 1560 and in the Church’s subordinate standard, the Westminster Confession of Faith, gives the foundation on which we shall build:

Our Lord Jesus ... instituted the sacrament of his body and blood ... for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of himself in his death, the sealing all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in him, their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto him; and to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him, and with each other, as members of his mystical body.

The Westminster Confession is at pains to emphasise that the event of the Lord’s Supper is an event of a sacrifice of praise, lest anything be detracted for Christ’s original and decisive work. Therefore the

---

<sup>15</sup> See the previous General Assembly report and deliverances of 19...

<sup>16</sup> See essay by R. Hamilton, “A reflection on the implications for celebrant and community when children are present at Communion” [on the Worship and Doctrine website??]

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Eucharistic Worship in ecumenical contexts*, pp. 18, 25-6.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.1.1.

relationship between the outward elements relate sacramentally to the body and blood of Christ, “in substance and nature ... still ... bread and wine, as they were before”. What is sacramental in relationship could be otherwise described as a “spiritual” relationship. In that the names and effects of body and blood are applied to ordinary bread and wine, the “work of the Spirit and the word of institution” guarantee the efficacy, i.e. the communicants spiritually receiving and feeding upon “Christ crucified and all the benefits of his death”.<sup>19</sup>

4.9 Thus understood, the Lord’s Supper is event as opposed to institution. There can be no lasting adoration of the elements which are shared, since it is the very act of sharing which is holy and a gift from God. There can be no summing-up, no full enough description, of what is involved. Participation is key, and the sharing is not the point at which the participation ends. As well as liturgical proprieties, there is something like a covenantal exchange. Christ offers his life to us and expects us to be offering our lives to him. His love is perfect and our love is to draw from that. Our faithfulness may know suffering unto death, but in dying we shall live. In line with the generations before us, our participation in communion is a real source of strength. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (cf. Romans 8.39).

4.10 Therefore we may return at this point to consider the aspect of celebration. There have been tendencies in practice to turn the Lord’s Supper into merely a memorial of things past. This can too easily distance the reality of hope and, in consequence, overplay themes of suffering and failure which are part, but not the only part, of the Sacrament. In addition, if the recital of words and going through of actions is all too like play-acting, and historically quaint, again the dimension of transformation, of inviting glory, is too much passed over. We shall not repeat or emulate Christ’s sacrifice but we would do well not to close our eyes to his living power amongst us even now, and most certainly within the Sacrament. There is a depth in the practice of “remembering”.<sup>20</sup> We shall use imagination, in the fullest sense of that term, to picture all that has been given and all that is yet to come; we shall be part of the communion of saints and thus not only joined with those who have gone before us but also those who will follow on; we shall pause in anticipation of heaven, on the “eighth day”<sup>21</sup>, as it has sometimes been said.

4.11 In practical terms this is an underpinning not for rushing through the Sacrament. Indeed sometimes liturgy can be over-wordy, but the solution is neither to gallop through the many words nor to cut down our thanksgiving so that we stop for as little time as possible. As has been said already, music and silence may well also have their place. Somehow all of history is focused in these extraordinary events of Holy Communion. What we regret and what has pained God must be left behind; where we stand by grace and what God has in store for us is to be affirmed. And our thanksgiving finds its decisive centre in God giving to us His Son.

4.12 Such thanksgiving, as it leads into communion, is an enterprise of prayer and presence. After the Word has been proclaimed, after God has spoken, the celebration of the Sacrament is an intense movement by ourselves into the heart of God’s life. We pray so as to know the victory of Christ over sin and death and as we pray, he meets us and assures us of that, giving us to taste of his victory, food for the onward pilgrimage of faith. We pray, and it matters immensely then that we join in prayer, and that whoever may articulate prayers on behalf of, or in dialogue with, the community gathered knows that he or she speaks as one with all. Liturgically the rhythm of congregational response or song is a means of affirming this, and there are in the historical traditions of the church ancient and wonderful forms, such as the “sursum corda” and the “sanctus”.<sup>22</sup> At the very least the people should be encouraged to say “Amen” to the thanksgiving prayers. In prayer we offer our presence to God, who will heal and renew us. And it is entirely right that at the same time we will remember before God others who are not sitting alongside us, that our prayers will touch the needs of the world and the witness of the church. As we pray, so we should act, and the opportunity for financial giving at the time of worship and the opportunities for showing mercy and kindness well outside the confines of the church assembly come to enable that.

4.13 At the end, however, it is also the sense of prayer and presence which meets us from the throne of grace that is the cause of our renewal. The invitation to share the meal is in anticipation of feasting with Christ in the kingdom when he comes again. In this interim time, we are assured that his prayers and ours are conjoined and, however it happens, – let us not lose ourselves in historic disputes – he is truly present to us as we eat and drink. He leads us on, not as dead words on a printed page but as the living Word; he has

---

<sup>19</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, chs. xxvii, xxix-xxx; cf. Scots Confession, chs. xxi-xxii.

<sup>20</sup> As in I Corinthians 11. 24-25, where the Greek word translated “remembrance” (*anamnesis*) has no exact equivalent in English. The ecumenical convergence document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* dwelt significantly on this point.

<sup>21</sup> Meeting “after the week, though of course still in the week, proposes that the salvation of our very times is in a coming grace larger than our times can contain” – G. Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 111.

<sup>22</sup> To “Lift up your hearts”, the response is “We lift them to the Lord”. The song of the angels to be joined in with is, “Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might ...”

gone ahead of us as the pioneer and perfecter of faith. In this understanding, all human leadership at the time of the Lord's Supper is relativised. The great weight of church tradition is to reserve presidency at the Lord's table to one ordained to that ministry, but, as our forebears took note, at the very same time that person is a receiver.<sup>23</sup> We can give only as we first receive. In practical terms, this can have its bearing on the order in which the table is served but more importantly simply in keeping in due order the aspirations of any who seek too far to control the life of the church. As Christ himself taught, service has greater significance than to be served. Both in the liturgy itself, and in the times of preparation and follow-on, the one who presides is one servant amongst many. There is a place for obedience as well as for creativity.

## 5 The challenge of continuing dialogue between traditions

5.1 It may be that many practical aspects of the Communion service lend themselves to variation. Reverence and awe may be as profound in the open air by a lochside as in stone-vaulted spaces to the accompaniment of rich harmony and dressed ritual. Understanding and the note of celebration may be as real in the company of children sitting to receive for the first time as amongst those who have over many years treasured the familiar pattern. Prayer and presence is a touching of the human heart and an offering to God both when it draws deep from the wells of historic liturgy and as it is crafted in the moment for and with the people to whom it belongs. What matters is that we are ready to give thanks so as to be empowered to serve, eager to be fed so that we may know better what it means to give to the glory of God.

5.2 Changing days bring changes of experience. If there might be a note of caution raised about rushing into change, it comes in recognition that there have been points of order not merely hotly disputed in the past but with genuine issues at stake; and while there has always been great diversity in the life of the worshipping church, diversity has its limits. A measure of debate and difference may be a healthy sign of the high value of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, but there is something strange and even dangerous when people simply forge their own path oblivious to our common belonging. Communion is not sealed on our own terms, however amenable and stylistically pleasing they might seem; the very foundation of the Sacrament hinges on obedience: "Do this in remembrance of me" is an imperative. Christ cannot be divided.

5.3 In this light, there is of course deep scandal through the divisions into which churches have fallen, unable to recognise one another's celebrations of the rite. Ecumenical awareness (in every sense, between localities and between denominations) offers at one and the same time blessing and challenge. We are drawn towards an appreciation of what we hold in common, and what beckons as a shared inheritance from the apostles. However, we are made conscious of there being demarcated camps of difference. Sadly the way in which churches understand the place and practice of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper bolster antagonism and distrust at the very point at which the salvation of the world should be clearly proclaimed. It is, in one respect, a sorry witness on the part of Christian people and, moreover, a stumbling-block (in the poor sense of that term) to those who look towards us seeking a message of peace and healing. It asks of us deep searching to locate the sin within and a patient yet urgent hoping in Christ to resolve our difficulties.<sup>24</sup>

5.4 It is a little hard to know what all is happening within the Church of Scotland. It is clear that there is no uniform pattern of celebrating the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, but that would be a sign of the impoverishment of imagination. Therefore it remains simply to reaffirm prime elements of what we would hold in common – the interplay of Word and Sacrament; the intimate connection between the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion; the regularity of celebrations; the integral linking of what belongs before and after the rite with the rite itself; the dependence upon the active work of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit, and the significance of the full participation of the people who so depend; and the placing of the Sacrament in a context where it focuses not merely an ancient Christian ritual but God's salvation of the world.

---

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Westminster Confession, ch.xxix.3.

<sup>24</sup> "Our journey, full of the fatigue owing to the overwhelming weight of the past, resembles that of the disciples to Emmaus. It is he who will resolve our difficulties ..." Paul Couturier, quoted in G. Curtis, *Paul Couturier and unity in Christ*, 275.