

THE EUCHARIST AND RENEWAL IN THE CHURCH

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We are glad to include below an address (without full annotation) given by a former Moderator of the Church of Scotland General Assembly, to a Conference on T. F. Torrance's theology at the Edinburgh University Outdoor Centre on Loch Tay in Scotland on 3rd November 2016.

The eucharist is . . . at once bound to history and related to the advent of Christ at the end of history. It reaches into the past, to the death of Christ, and sets it in the present as reality operative here and now in the church. On the other hand, the eucharist reaches out beyond the present into the future and becomes the means whereby the church in the present is brought under the power of the advent of Christ. The eucharist thus belongs to the very nature of the church, rooting and grounding it in the historical Christ and his saving acts, and also bringing to the church its own ultimate reality from beyond history It is because the church receives its being ever anew, through the eucharist, as the new creation which is yet to be revealed at the Parousia, that it lives in dynamic tension here and now on the very frontiers of eternity.

Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, pp. 419-20

In the Eucharist we are at the centre of the world: we are where Christ, the Son, gives his life to his Father in the Spirit. And in the Eucharist we are at the end of the world: we are seeing how the world's calling is fulfilled in advance; we are seeing ourselves and our world as they really are, contemplating them in the depths of God, finding their meaning in relation to God. And the job of a Christian is constantly trying to dig down to that level of reality, and to allow gratitude, repentance and transformation to well up from that point. 'With you is the fountain of life', says the psalm; and it is that fountain that we drink from in Holy Communion.

Rowan Williams, *Being Christian*, p. 59

Dearest indeed, who are intoxicated with love. Intoxicated indeed, who deserve to be present at the wedding feast of the Lord, eating and drinking at his table in his kingdom, when He takes his Church to him in glory, without blemish or wrinkle or any defect. Then will he intoxicate his dearest ones with the torrent of his delight, for in the most passionate and most chaste embrace of Bridegroom and Bride, the rush of the river that makes glad the city of God. I think this is no other than what the Son of God, who waits on us as he goes, promised . . . Here is fullness without disgust, insatiable curiosity that is not restless, and eternal and endless desire that knows no lack, and last, that sober intoxication that does not come from drinking too much, that is no reeking of wine but a burning for God.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)

Let me say, first of all, how delighted and honoured I am to be here and how much I have been enjoying our time together. Regarding my own modest offering, I should say something by way of preamble.

When I hung up my Moderatorial shoes in May, I fondly imagined I would have lots of spare time to devote to interesting “extra-curricular” pursuits – theological and otherwise. Alas, I had not reckoned with the sheer volume of demands on the time and attention of a recently demobbed Moderator. I have, for example, already spoken at an event this week, and I have another to attend on Saturday. That I *am* here is due to three factors: the persuasive powers of my – our – esteemed and distinguished friend and Retreat leader, Robert Walker, and my huge admiration for the renowned theologian after whom this Retreat is named. I cherish enduring gratitude to Professor Torrance for personal support and encouragement at a particularly challenging stage on my journey. Professor Torrance was, as most of you know, a highly distinguished predecessor as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. One of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, his shoes I do not feel worthy to polish. A third reason is the real pleasure and nourishment in fellowship I found in my all-too-brief time at the Retreat in June of last year, shortly after taking up office. The moving time of prayer we then shared, was a source of abiding encouragement throughout my year.

It is a blessing to be here. In the circumstances, what I have to offer, at best, are some notes – rather extended notes as, of course, you’d expect from a *Gaidheal* – reflective of my own reading and thinking, *towards* (= not there yet) a fresh view of the significance of the Eucharist, in the context of the church’s

renewal for mission.

I Introduction – a Difficult Legacy

Eucharist and Renewal in the Church – the title I was given – invites reflection on the ways in which our understanding and practice of the Lord's Supper may further renewal, on both individual and corporate levels, in the contemporary Church. Reflection along these lines is immediately beset by, at least, two major problems.

First, there is the extraordinary and sad fact that a constituent element of Christian worship, clearly intended to be a focus of our unity and fellowship as disciples of Jesus, has proved over the centuries to be the cause of some of our deepest divisions as Christians.

Then, second, we have to reckon with the sheer complexity of the Eucharistic theologies that have been elaborated in our diverse traditions, across the centuries.

All of this could lead to gloomy thoughts about the possibility of the Eucharist contributing anything to renewal in the church in our time. Such a conclusion, however, would be mistaken. While we have a long way to go, there are real signs of hope, as we see in our time increasing convergence, across our traditions, in respect of Eucharistic understanding and practice.

One of the most important contributions of the particular reformed tradition represented by Professor Torrance, with its *semper reformanda* watchword, must be to remind us, and other ecclesiastical traditions, of the constant need to re-examine all that is most hoary and unchallenged in our inheritance, in light of our foundational documents.

A Painful History

As I said, it is a sad fact of Church history that a rite, or ordinance, which was intended to be a focal point of unity among Christian people, has rather occasioned the most bitter and divisive, and continuing, quarrels. Of the various terms we use to describe this sacrament, as Thiselton says, "The three terms 'Eucharist,' 'Holy Communion' and 'Lord's Supper' can all be defended from biblical usage." As he indicates, "the Greek *eucharistēsas* means 'having given thanks' in 1 Corinthians 11:24; 'Communion' reflects *koinōnia*, 'sharing in' the blood of Christ, in 1 Corinthians 10:16; and the 'Lord's supper' is Paul's term for the rite in 1 Corinthians 11:20 (Gk. *kuriakon deipnon*, probably the main meal off the

day regardless of chronological timing).” Thiselton adds that “‘Mass’ may have become, or is becoming, a little dated, since it reflects a popularization of the last words of the Latin rite.”¹

Too often, however, even the terms we use to speak of the sacrament are laden with freight that is either acceptable or unacceptable, depending on its perceived associations. In my own distinctive Presbyterian background, I was early conditioned to regard with theological suspicion any person or denomination which used the term “Eucharist” for the “Lord’s Supper.” Holy Communion was marginally less doubtful. You’ll appreciate that I’ve come a considerable way, when I am happy to use the preferred ecumenical term in this context.

The Eucharistic meal (we’ll return to that latter term) separated Catholics and 16th century Reformers. Within the Protestant movement itself, widely differing views are held by the Lutheran, Free and Reformed Churches. In Wainwright’s words, the “very centrality of the Eucharist to the church has made of it both the sign of unity among Christians and yet also a focus of the divisions that have arisen among them.”

Such debates have been, of course, wide ranging, with differences in understanding and practice, and are “often symptomatic of other differences in doctrine and life that have arisen among them.”²

We are all familiar – maybe too familiar – with the hotly debated issues, and we shall return to some of them: In what way exactly is Jesus present in the bread and wine? What benefit comes to those who partake? Who can preside or officiate at communion? How frequently should the Supper be celebrated? Who may fittingly participate? And so on.

As one example, we may recall the heated “Supper strife” between Luther and Zwingli, and their famous meeting at Marburg in 1529. There was vigorous debate over the meaning of the copula “is” in 1 Corinthians 11:24 (“This *is* my body”). Luther (if a certain tradition is to be believed), used his finger, dipped in the froth of his German ale, to write on the table between the two of them, *Hoc est corpus meum*, (“This is my body”), and would repeatedly point to the table and the foaming *est* (“is”), in countering Zwingli’s memorialist arguments. I assume Luther would have had to reinforce the letters with each new tankard of beer. Sadly, he and Zwingli came to no agreement.

Looking back over Christian history, it is quite extraordinary how a relatively

1 Anthony C. Thiselton, *Systematic Theology* (London: SPCK, 2015), 330-1.

2 Geoffrey Wainwright, “Eucharist,” in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, eds, Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason, and Hugh Prior (Oxford University Press, 2000), 215.

few clear references to the Supper in the New Testament have generated such a vast amount of varied theological superstructure. If you wish to absorb some sense of how enormous and varied that superstructure is, Boersma and Levering's tome, published earlier last year, is a good place to begin. I guarantee, however, it will leave you gasping at times for some clear, unpolluted Tayside air.³

Hopeful Signs

In terms of more recent ecumenical discussion, across various ecclesiastical fronts, it is encouraging to witness some significant progress towards (that word again) a resolution of the sad and shameful divisions occasioned by the Supper. As Wainwright says, "It has been possible to compose a theological account of the Eucharist that finds broad support, even while acknowledging that some points of contention remain only partially settled and so still prevent complete mutual acceptance among the churches."⁴

It should be noted that one of the most significant of recent ecumenical documents is the 1982 World Council of Churches' ground-breaking *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.⁵ As in the case of baptism, *BEM* sets out the many dimensions of the Eucharist: "thanksgiving to the Father, anamnesis or memorial of Christ, invocation of the Spirit, communion of the faithful, and meal of the kingdom."⁶

As Kärkkäinen remarks, it is undoubtedly a mark of the wisdom of *BEM* that it "does not engage the theological controversies such as how to define Christ's presence but rather concentrates on what Christians may be able to affirm together."⁷

Worthy of mention also is the agreed statement by the Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), otherwise known as the "Windsor Statement."⁸ Anglicans and Catholics here agree that "Christ's redeeming

3 Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

4 Wainwright (2000), 215.

5 *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

6 See "Eucharist" in *BEM*, pp. 5-26. Quoted by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Eschatology," in eds Kelly M. Kapic & Bruce L. McCormack, *Mapping Modern Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 367.

7 Ibid.

8 Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), *Agreed Statement* (London: Anglican Consultative Council; Rome: Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 1971).

death and resurrection took place once for all in history . . . one, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world.”⁹ “No repetition” of it is possible, “although in the Communion there is indeed a ‘making effective of an event in the past.’”¹⁰ Thiselton points to the regrettable fact that “there appears to remain some inconsistency in Roman views; Vatican II still adheres to Aquinas’s doctrine of transubstantiation.”¹¹ The nature of the Eucharistic supper, as we shall see, in fact requires a replacing of all versions of “substance” ontology with an authentic “relational” ontology. I have no intention, however, of taking a philosophical route in this paper, as you’ll no doubt be pleased to know.

In light of the long, contentious history of the Eucharist, it is not surprising that some contemporary churches, such as the Salvation Army, have dispensed with the Eucharist altogether. It seems, on the face of it, a sensible solution. Despite my holding the Salvation Army, within whose communion I have good friends, in the highest admiration, what has been given to us in the Eucharist – and its potential for renewal in the church – is just too precious and wonderful a gift to take such a course.

II The Sacrament of New Creation

What, then, is the Eucharist all about? In my view, the Australian New Testament scholar Michael Bird has expressed it rather well: “The meaning of Eucharist is ultimately anchored in a story, in fact, *the story*. It is a snap shot of the grand narrative about God, Creation, the Fall, Israel, the Exile, the Messiah, the Church, and the Consummation. Eucharist is ultimately a microcosm of our theology, as what we think about gospel, salvation, and community, impacts our theology of the Eucharist. The bread and wine tell a story about God, redemption, Jesus, and salvation... The Eucharist is essentially *remembering* Jesus’ death, *reinscribing* the story of Jesus’ passion with paschal imagery, *restating* the promises of the new covenant, *rehearsing* the victory of Jesus over sin and death, and *refocusing* our attention toward the *parousia* of the Lord Jesus.”¹²

9 Ibid., 2:5.

10 Ibid. See Thiselton (2015), 333.

11 Ibid.

12 Michael Bird, “A Feast of Meanings: Theology of the Eucharist (Part I),” *Euangelion* 30th July 2011. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/euangelion/2011/07/a-feast-of-meanings-theology-of-the-eucharist-part-1/>.

Living in the Light of the Church's Final Destination

Tom Wright has written, "The question for us must be: how can we, today, get in on this story? How can we understand this remarkable gift of God and use it properly? How can we make the best of it?"¹³

A good deal of what I want to share with you takes its cue from Wright's ecclesiology and sacramentology, partly because I believe it to be essentially true to the scriptural witness, and partly because I believe it to be highly suggestive in reflecting on the place of the Eucharist in the renewal of the church today. Stephen Kuhrt has skilfully summarised Wright's theology and for the purposes of this paper I shall follow his analysis.¹⁴

Wright discerns in the New Testament a deep and rich ecclesiology and argues "that allegiance to the visible, historical Church is part of allegiance to the gospel itself. Paying attention to both the story of Israel and God's purpose for the world are the vital steps to appreciating this."¹⁵ For Wright, the gospel or good news at core refers to "the royal proclamation that in and through Jesus, declared by his resurrection to be Messiah and Lord, YHWH the God of Israel has become King and begun his process of putting his world right . . . Through the coming of God's Spirit everyone, without restriction, is summoned to be part of this renewed world that he is remaking."¹⁶ Every aspect of "building for the kingdom," *done in the name of Jesus*, whether evangelism, the seeking of social justice and care for the environment and creation, is equally "gospel work."¹⁷

In this perspective the calling of the people of God can be understood as "to live in the light of Easter by seeking to anticipate in the present as much as possible of [the] future resurrection life."¹⁸ The Church's role is to proclaim that Jesus is Lord and "it does this through its words and deeds imagining and embodying the reality of the 'new creation' that Jesus Christ has come to bring."¹⁹

The Church's worship and mission can therefore only be properly understood in light of its final destination. "Worship" is fundamentally about "the Church being led by the Spirit to live in ways that anticipate the reality of God's future age."²⁰

13 Tom Wright, *The Meal Jesus Gave Us* (London: Hodder, 2002), 34.

14 Stephen Kuhrt, *Tom Wright for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2011).

15 Ibid., 59.

16 Ibid., 48.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 58. 2011/07.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 61.

Eucharist as a "Thin Place"

Within this broad ecclesiological context, we can begin to grasp the appropriate and valuable role of the sacraments. For Wright himself, "the sacraments are to be understood as special points, established by Jesus and used by the Holy Spirit to bring God's presence and new creation into the world."²¹

This is a sacramental theology, as Kuhrt says, "based on the biblical world-view of heaven and earth being understood as interlocking dimensions of the created order rather than distant from one another. It also rests upon continuity with the presentation of salvation in the Old Testament and the process towards God's ultimate intention to fill the whole of the world with his presence (Isaiah 11:9)." Old Testament anticipations of this can be seen in the "establishment of the Temple as the place where heaven and earth were joined and YHWH could be met (1 Kings 8) and the connection made, particularly in Isaiah, between the future renewal of the covenant and the renewal of creation (Isaiah 54-55)."

In this light, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Eucharist is made not a "bare" but an "effective" sign of God's salvation. It is given "to bring the Messiah's risen body, as that part of God's creation that has already been renewed, into the world."²²

III Christ's Presence: Agreed Reality and Controverted Mode

It is important to appreciate that the Eucharistic presence of Christ has been a constant confession of the church throughout its history. Where Christians have differed sharply is "in accounts of how he is both host and food."²³ If Eucharist, then, is all about "presence" how *should* we think of the presence of the living Christ in relation to the Eucharist and the elements of bread and wine?

At the risk of bringing coals to Newcastle, let me quickly remind you of the principal understandings held within the church on this subject, offering in each case a brief assessment in light of the ecclesiology we have just sketched.

Aquinas

There is, first, the historic Roman Catholic view, with its doctrine of transubstantiation. The first thing to be noted about this teaching is its

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Wainwright, 215.

philosophical and theological sophistication. In this tradition “transubstantiation” is the term employed “for describing the process that takes place at the eucharistic consecration: the bread and wine undergo a ‘metaphysical’ change into Christ’s blood and body.” It follows that “the Eucharist is a sacrifice.”²⁴

It was of course the great Aquinas who formulated this official teaching. In seeking to explain the ‘real presence’ of Christ’s body and blood in the sacrament, Aquinas drew on the main school of philosophy that was available to him – that of Aristotle – with its distinction between a “substance” and its “properties.” As Placher explains; “In the normal course of things, properties change, but the underlying substance remains the same. I paint a red box blue, and its color has changed from red to blue, but it remains a box. In the Eucharist, Aquinas said, the properties remain the same, but the substance changes. The elements still look and taste like bread and wine, but the bread and wine have been transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council affirmed transubstantiation as a doctrine of the church.”²⁵

Interestingly, like Catholics, the Orthodox regard the Eucharist primarily as a sacrifice. The Orthodox believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but unlike Catholics (or Lutherans, as we’ll see in a minute), Orthodox tradition “refrains from human conceptual attempts to describe it.”²⁶

Michael Bird describes a conversation he had with an Orthodox priest. “Nikos, mate, how can the bread and wine be bread and wine and be Christ at the same time? After a brief pause he looked me in the eye and replied, ‘Dashed if I know mate, it’s just a mystery.’” The priest’s language, in fact, was rather more colourful than my paraphrase suggests (after all, this conversation took place in Australia). As Bird, in my view rightly, says, the fact is we don’t know, and we cannot know. Sophisticated a doctrine as transubstantiation has been, with its philosophical underpinnings, it certainly feels a strange notion today. Apart from this Eucharistic context, no one I think now holds by Aristotle’s doctrine of substance and accidents. It did duty for its time.

Catholic theology itself has been aware of the problem – not least transubstantiation’s apparent detraction from the uniqueness of the incarnation – and, particularly under the influence of late 19th century liturgical movements, modern Catholic theologians like Karl Rahner, Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx have attempted to produce a better formulation of the classic transubstantiation

24 Kärkäinen, 366.

25 William C. Placher, ed., *Essentials of Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 227-8.

26 Kärkäinen, 366.

doctrine. "In addition to reestablishing the integral link between the Word and sacraments, these theologians, through the notion of symbol, embodiment and relationality have conceived of the presence of Christ and the effects of the sacrament in a way that is also more in keeping with the general move away from a substance ontology to a relational ontology."²⁷ There have been discussions – notably in the work of Pannenberg – of the value of a term such as "transsignification," which simply means "a change in the 'meaning' of an act such as when a paper is 'changed' into a letter."²⁸ There is clearly much potential ecumenical mileage in these discussions. Things are moving on.

Luther

Turning to the Lutherans, they, of course, in substituting "consubstantiation" for what Luther saw as the crudity of "transubstantiation," still seek to secure the idea of Christ's real presence. With his doctrine of consubstantiation, Luther retained a bodily presence of Christ, "in, with and under" the sacramental elements. This was based in part on a "literal" reading of John 6 and, the "This is my body" affirmation, and partly on his view that a proper understanding of orthodoxy's *communicatio idiomatum* ("communication of attributes"), the human nature of Jesus must share in the divine ubiquity.²⁹ Personally, I find it difficult to disagree with the view that the difference between the Catholic and Lutheran positions is little more than a matter of semantics.

Zwingli

For Zwingli, in reaction to the perceived Catholic approach to the sacraments as involving other than the performance of sympathetic magic, there was simply no question of a "real presence" in the Eucharist. Despite Luther's protestations to the contrary, for Zwingli the Eucharist was a bare sign. Christ's body was present only in heaven. And that was that. The Eucharist was an act of pure remembrance – and nothing more.

Calvin

For Calvin, the sacraments related closely to the preaching of the gospel: "a

²⁷ Ibid., 367.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Daniel J. Treier, "Jesus Christ, Doctrine of," in ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (London: SPCK, 2005), 367.

sacrament is never without a preceding promise but is joined to it as a sort of appendix."³⁰ When joined to the Word, however, not only do they fulfil the same office as the Word of God – “to offer and set forth the Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace”³¹- but their visible and physical component means that they do better what the Word does. “The sacraments bring the clearest promises, and they have this character over and above the Word because they represent them for us as painted in a picture from life.”³² They do not work *ex opera operato*, but to be effective must be received by faith on the part of the participant.

In Calvin’s understanding, the Supper is essentially a banquet at which we feed on Christ.³³ He affirms the importance of holding “remembering” and “feeding” together, rejecting the notion that the Supper is a bare sign. Calvin recognized that in order to feed on Christ in the Supper, Christ himself must be present. His controversy with the Roman Catholic church was not about the fact but the mode of that presence. While refusing a literal meaning to the words, *this is my body*, he equally insists that in Jesus’ instituting of the Supper, “there is a mystery of sacramental union here indicated that lifts His language far above being legitimately called ‘figurative’ without any qualification.”³⁴ Calvin’s theology of union with Christ, pervasively present in his Eucharistic writings, was central to his understanding of the Supper. The fact of union with Christ by His Spirit makes it quite unnecessary to locate that presence in the bread and wine. Rather, we are raised up to heaven (where the risen body of Jesus is located in the between-times), by the Spirit, to feed spiritually on Christ, even as we feed physically on the bread and wine to nourish our bodies.³⁵

IV Why Would We Miss our Meal?

Even in light of this little sketch, it seems clear that further progress in our

30 John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 2 vols. Ed. John T. MacNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965), IV, xiv, 3.

31 *Ibid.*, xiv, 17.

32 *Ibid.*, xiv, 5.

33 *Ibid.*, xvii, 1.

34 Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1995), 197.

35 John Calvin, “Mutual Consent in Regard to the Sacraments; between the Ministers of the Church of Zurich and John Calvin, Minister of the Church of Geneva,” in eds. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, *Selected Works of John Calvin, Tracts and Letters* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849; reprinted Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 240.

understanding of the Eucharist must involve a re-examination of the relevant biblical material. In that connection, someone has made the point that if a Martian had ever dropped into medieval discussions of the Eucharist, they would never have guessed that it was essentially a meal. With his usual incisiveness, Anthony Thiselton has pointed out that "in the Synoptic Gospels and in Paul the *context* of the administration of the Last Supper and Lord's Supper is crucial to its understanding."³⁶ Although this has been frequently neglected in the history of sacramental theology, fresh attention to the context of the Supper in the Gospels and Paul seems the route of greatest potential for the effective reinstatement of the Eucharist in the life of the church today.

Significance of the Passover Setting

That context was, of course, Jesus' observing of the *Jewish Passover meal*. The preparation of the meal as a preparation for the passive is made explicit in each of the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 14:14; Matt. 26:17-19; Luke 22:7-13, 15). In Judaism the Passover liturgy is known as the *Sēder*. "This takes the form of reliving the narrative world of participants in the Passover (Exod. 12:1-51). In effect, participants 'relive' the Passover events of the deliverance from their bondage in Egypt, and the beginning of a new life as the redeemed people of God."³⁷

With regard to our understanding of the Eucharist, Thiselton's observations are so important that I shall follow him further. Establishing the point that both Exodus 12 and the Jewish Mishnah make clear that the Passover is a *dramatic event* – in terms of the helpful way (the R.C.) Balthasar and (the Reformed) Kevin Vanhoozer describe doctrine – Thiselton offers a quotation from Exodus 12 and one from the Mishnah:

Exod. 12:25-27: "When you come to the land that the Lord will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this observance?' you shall say, 'It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord.'"

The Mishnah adds: "in every generation a man must *so regard himself as if he came forth himself out of Egypt*" (*m. Pesahim* 10:5).

Theologians like Jeremias and Leenhardt have demonstrated that "the Last

36 Thiselton (2015), 331.

37 Ibid.

Supper dovetails with observance of the Passover.³⁸ To offer one significant example, it has been shown that there are close parallels between the *Sēder* and the words of institution of the Lord's Supper. The *Sēder* begins with the doxology: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Creator of the produce of the vine." Jeremias and Leenhardt link Jesus' blessing of the bread and wine with this. Those of us raised on the good old A.V. will recall that the bread, not God, is made the object of Jesus' blessing. The version I happen to use most of the time, the NRSV, follows suit by inserting an "it." But if Jeremias and Leenhardt are correct, as they seem almost certainly to be, there is no thought at all of "consecrating" the bread. In line with the *Sēder* parallel, it is God who is the object of blessing.

The *Sēder* then reads, "This is the bread of affliction that our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt" and as Leenhardt points out, it would have come as a tremendous surprise to the disciples when Jesus suddenly departed from the expected words, in their place pronouncing: "This is my body" (Matt. 26:26-27; 1 Cor. 11:24).³⁹

This apparently deliberate linking by Jesus of the Last Supper and the Passover liturgy has important implications for our understanding of the meaning of "This is my body." Referring to the endless debates about whether the sentence is literal (Aquinas), fully and effectively symbolic (as Luther and Calvin thought); or metaphorical (Zwingli), Thiselton argues, persuasively I think, for a different understanding. Drawing on the use of the "dramatic" by Balthasar, Vanhoozer and Ricoeur, he makes a case for "dramatic" being a more appropriate word.⁴⁰

For this he finds confirmation in an examination of "remembrance" (Gk. *anamnēsis*; Heb. *zēker*). "Do this in remembrance of me," reads 1 Cor. 11:24-25 and Luke 22:19. *Touto poieite eis tēn emēn anamnēsin*. As Thiselton points out, the Greek and Hebrew verb "does not just mean "to call to mind" in the sense of purely intellectual recollection."

His further comment is illuminating: "A generation ago the 'objective' force of the Hebrew was probably overstated, as if it were an objective, virtual *repetition* of a past event. Today most or probably all traditions recognize that the work of Christ on the cross remains in principle 'once for all' (Gk. *ephapax*). The Hebrew and Greek usage implies both this and also a middle course: that of *dramatic participation*. When believers pray to God: 'Remember the distress of your servants' (cf. Lam. 5:1; Exod. 32:13; Deut. 9:27; Ps. 20:3), they ask God to act as a participant in their woe."

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 332.

"The purpose of dramatic symbolism is to create a *narrative world* in which participants almost (but not literally) 'relive' their part. It is well summed up," concludes Thiselton, "by the black spiritual, 'Were you there when they crucified my Lord?'"⁴¹

How Meals Function

The meal-nature of the Eucharist as initiated by Jesus is, I think, where a re-appropriation of the Eucharist in the context of church renewal requires to be focused in our time.

Across societies and cultures of all times and places, meals have been crucial to the development of relationships, a key contribution to social well-being. As Tim Chester says, "Food connects."⁴² In each of the Gospels, particularly in Luke's Gospel, we see meals imbued with a deeply theological significance. In Luke the sentence "The Son of Man came..." is concluded in each of three ways: 1) "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45); 2) "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10); 3) "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking..." (Luke 7:34). As Chester says, if the first two are statements of purpose, "the third is a statement of method. *How* did Jesus come? He came eating and drinking."⁴³

Jesus was seriously into eating and drinking, as the accusation of his enemies to the effect that he was "a glutton and a drunkard" (Luke 7:34) suggests. In Chester's words, "He did evangelism and discipleship round a table with some grilled fish, a loaf of bread and a jug of wine."⁴⁴ Luke Karris maybe exaggerates only slightly when he says, "In Luke's Gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal."⁴⁵

Similarly, Rowan Williams sets his discussion of the Eucharist in the wider context of the many stories about Jesus and hospitality in the Gospels, especially Luke. "The meals that Jesus shares in his ministry are the way in which he begins to re-create a community, to lay the foundations for rethinking what the

41 Ibid.

42 Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community & Mission around the Table* (Nottingham: IVP, 2011), 10.

43 Ibid., 12.

44 Ibid., 13.

45 Ibid., 14.

words 'the people of God' mean."⁴⁶ He goes on to show that one of the major themes of the resurrection stories is the way in which all this starts over again on the far side of Jesus' death and resurrection – "that when the risen Christ eats with the disciples it is not just a way of proving he is 'really' there; it is a way of saying that what Jesus did in creating a new community during his earthly life, he is doing now with the apostles in his *risen* life." Which is why, "throughout the centuries since, Christians have been able to say exactly what the apostles say: they are the people with whom Jesus ate and drank after he was raised from the dead. Holy Communion makes no sense at all if you do not believe in the resurrection."

"In Holy Communion Jesus Christ tells us that he wants our company." That, says Williams, is possibly "the most simple thing we can say about Holy Communion, yet it is still supremely worth saying."⁴⁷ In Holy Communion we experience the call to "a new level of life together, a new fellowship and solidarity, and a new willingness and capacity to be welcomers [ourselves]," becoming "involved in Jesus' own continuing work of bridging the gulfs between people, drawing them into shared life, in the central task of bridging the gulf between God and humanity created by our selfish, forgetful and fearful habits."⁴⁸

Here we are being encouraged to think in fresh ways about the Eucharist as a sacrament of God's great project of new creation. We remember how Jewish sacred meals – not least the Passover – were believed to function. As for Jewish families sitting around the Passover meal, for whom time and space telescope together, within the sacramental world of the Eucharist, in Tom Wright's words, "past and present are one. Together, they point forwards to the still future liberation."⁴⁹

A Meal in Three Dimensions: "Past," "Present," "Future"

In this perspective, and to follow Wright's very helpful thoughts for a moment, we have to think of the Eucharistic meal in terms of three dimensions: past, present and future. "We break this bread to share in the body of Christ; we do it in remembrance of him; we become, for a moment, the disciples sitting around the table at the Last Supper." But in saying this we've only said half of what needs to be said. In Wright's words, "To make any headway in

46 Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (London: SPCK, 2014), 44.

47 Ibid., 41.

48 Ibid., 46-7.

49 Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), 286.

understanding the eucharist, we must see it just as much in terms of the arrival of God's future in the present, not just the extension of God's past (or of Jesus' past) into our present . . . The Jesus who gives himself to us as food and drink is himself [through the resurrection] the beginning of God's new world." And so, "at communion, we are like the children of Israel in the wilderness, tasting fruit plucked from the promised land. It is the future come to meet us in the present,"⁵⁰

Wright I think is onto something deeply important [you may of course disagree] in holding that this eschatological perspective "is a far more helpful way to talk about the presence of Christ in the eucharist than any amount of redefinitions of the old language of transubstantiation." Such language was, he says, not so much the wrong answer as the right answer to the wrong question. "That was one way of saying what needed to be said [insistence on the true presence of Christ] in language that some people in the Middle Ages could understand, but it has produced all kinds of misunderstandings and abuse."⁵¹

As we have already seen, the Eucharist is the sacrament of new creation. The only part of the old creation which has yet been transformed and liberated from bondage to decay is the body of Christ, "the body which died on the cross and is now alive with a life that death can't touch. Jesus has gone ahead into God's new creation, and as we look back to his death through the lens he himself provided – that is, the meal he shared on the night he was betrayed – we find that he comes to meet us in and through the symbols of creation, the bread and the wine, which are thus taken up into the Christ-story, the event of new creation itself, and become vessels, carriers, of God's new world and the saving events which enable us to share it."⁵²

In this light, every celebration of the Supper is a breaking into the present of God's future and the Supper is most fully understood "as the anticipation of the banquet when heaven and earth are made new, the marriage supper of the Lamb."⁵³

A fully biblical eschatology makes clear that we anticipate not a disembodied future existence (as is commonly supposed in Christian folk religion) but, in terms for example of Revelation 21 and 22, a renewed physical world transformed from top to bottom.

50 Ibid., 286-7.

51 Ibid., 287.

52 Ibid., 287-8.

53 Ibid., 288.

Why not Grain and Water?

In this connection, Peter Leithart offers helpful reflections on the significance of the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine.⁵⁴ He suggests we think less about the physics of the bread than of the simple fact that Jesus chose to use bread, rather than e.g. roasted grain or red meat. Pointing out that we are a bread-making humanity and that bread production 'assumes some degree of developed agriculture, the technology of milling flour and baking, and an exchange system that enables the bread to arrive at the Table,' Leithart argues that in offering bread at His feast, Jesus was taking up this whole system into the kingdom as well.⁵⁵

Similarly, at the Lord's Supper we drink wine. Jesus did not give his disciples grapes 'but the blood of the grape, which is the creation transformed by creativity and labour.. Like bread, wine assumes a degree of technological sophistication, as well as a measure of social and political formation.' In this way 'the table discloses the mystery of the creature's participation in the Creator's creativity, and this participation produces goods that are ours only as gifts received, goods to be shared and enjoyed in communion. The Supper closes the gap between joy in creation and pious devotion to God.'⁵⁶

Leithart notes, however, that in the case of wine we dealing with a drink not merely of nutrition but of celebration. The vision of life implied by the use of wine is not purely utilitarian (bread and water in that case would have sufficed) but celebratory. There is an echo here of Calvin, who claimed emphatically that the very structure of creation indicates that it exists to be enjoyed and not merely used.⁵⁷

In more directly biblical perspective, Leithart argues that wine has both sabbatical and eschatological significance. Wine is appropriate as a Sabbath drink because it induces relaxation. The priests of Israel never did relax while they ministered for the blood of their sacrifices did not atone for sin (see Heb. 10:11-14). Under the terms of the old covenant, no one could enjoy the full Sabbath. The drinking of wine in the immediate presence of God was strictly

54 See Peter J. Leithart, *Blessed are the hungry. Meditations on the Lord's Supper* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2000). I have been unable to peruse this work, apart from a few on-line excerpts, but have accessed three of Leithart's on-line articles (see below) in which some of his distinctive thoughts on the Supper are summarized.

55 Leithart, 'Worship and World', *First Things*, 30th March 2015; <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/leithart/2015/03/worship-and-world>.

56 Leithart, 'Do This', *First Things*, 23rd March 2012; <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2012/03/do-this>.

57 Calvin, *Inst.* 3.10.2.

prohibited (Lev. 10:9). With the coming, however, of a new and better covenant in Jesus, involving the shedding of better blood, the Lord invites his people to a joyous banquet of wine.

A 'Sabbath drink', 'wine takes time to make, and you drink wine at the end of things, when your work is completed.' Through the shedding of Christ's blood, 'we have entered into rest. We are in the sanctuary drinking wine, a sign not only of the joy but of the rest of the New Covenant.'⁵⁸ The drinking of wine is therefore a wonderfully fitting anticipation of the joy-filled coming banquet, the marriage supper of the Lamb, when heaven and earth will be joined together in perfect unity.

Unity is all

Before offering a few words by way of conclusion, it would be wrong not to say something about the central blessing of this meal as the sacrament of the church's unity. We eat the bread and drink the wine *together*. We have come round full circle really, for we began by highlighting the tragedy of the fact that this meal given us by Jesus to express our unity in Christ has been so often the cause of our deepest and most bitter divisions, with every side convinced that they have a uniquely accurate grasp of the scriptural teaching. It might be tempting to follow our Salvationist friends and impose a moratorium on eucharistic celebration in all our churches until we've got this fully sorted out. I fear we would never reach agreement on that either. We are certainly called to redouble our efforts to maximise the practice of eucharistic hospitality within and between our churches, and, as we have seen, some progress has been made. The challenge is urgent, for we cannot expect to evangelize the world when we cannot even eat together.

In 1 Corinthians Paul lays great emphasis on the fact that the 'one loaf' (1 Cor. 10:16) is representative of the unity of one people with their one Lord. In the only passage in his writings where Paul handles the Lord's Supper, it is significant that it was a serious problem over unity that called forth his reflection.⁵⁹

58 Leithart, 'Eucharistic Meditation', *First Things*, 7th April 2004 (<http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/leithart/2013/04/eucharistic-meditation-133>).

59 It is a remarkable feature of the Lord's Supper in Paul's letters that "were it not for First Corinthians, we would not even know that it was practised in Pauline communities." Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology. Magnifying God in Christ* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 730. One can but assume that having handed on to his churches the Eucharistic tradition he had received, the Supper was regularly observed in these churches without any problem requiring to be addressed in Paul's – let's remember – always *occasional* correspondence.

'Together' is the way things are intended to be. God's ultimate purpose is the bringing together of all things under Christ as head. At the Supper, we are reminded that 'the ideal world is not a world of atomized individuals but an irreducibly social reality. Because we eat together of one loaf, we are one Body, members not only of Christ but of one another (1 Cor. 10:17), called to radical, Christ-like, self-sacrificing love, to use whatever gifts we have for the edification of the Body, to live lives of forgiveness, forbearance and peace.'⁶⁰

It was at this point that things had gone so badly wrong in the Corinthian church. Arguably the single most important thing about this passage is its summons to the contemporary church, as the right way forward for us all, to reconnect what we should never have allowed to come apart – the theological and the social dimensions of the Supper. Ironically, it is likely the very problem that broke surface in Corinth that brought about this disastrous separation in the first place.

Clearly, the Lord's Supper in the Pauline communities was celebrated in a social context, as part of a regular meal. As was (and is) appropriate, the churches were representative of every social class. What seems to have happened – there are different ways of interpreting the evidence – is that at these shared meals the rich members in the community were eating and drinking prodigiously, while the poor were not even receiving sufficient to eat. It's probable that the rich arrived early for the meal. It was effortless for them to do so. The poor – the majority of them presumably slaves – could only join the congregation when their work was done, likely late at night. It was, apparently, too much trouble for the rich to wait for them, so they set about the meal at their personal convenience, and by the time the slaves were released from duty, their rich brothers (and sisters?) have consumed most of what is available.

Paul is livid. By preserving, in this way, distinctions commonly characteristic of pagan society, the rich believers are guilty of dishonouring God and humiliating their poorer brothers and sister. Hence the urgency of Paul's *allēlous ekdechesthe* (1 Cor. 11:33): 'Wait for one another', or, if you prefer, 'Accept, receive, welcome one another.' A summons applying to so many situations.

So serious, in fact, is this business, that Paul denies they are celebrating the Lord's Supper at all. In so behaving, the rich have failed to discern the Lord's body. The Supper after all signifies Christ's giving his life for the sake of others. By his death he created one people and so when fellow believers are shamefully mistreated it demonstrates with shocking clarity that they haven't a 'scooby' why Christ died. True remembrance in the Supper invariably brings transformation

60 Leithart (2000), 172.

of one's life. As Schreiner says, 'Those who have truly experienced God's grace as mediated in Christ's death long to bless others, just as they themselves have received the blessing of forgiveness through Christ's self-giving on their behalf.'⁶¹

In a recent weekly Angelus address, Pope Francis put it well: 'The Eucharist, source of love for the life of the Church, is a school of love and solidarity. Those who nourish themselves from the Bread of Christ cannot remain indifferent in face of the many who do not have their daily bread.'

V Conclusion

A few brief words of conclusion. These are, effectively, mere bullet-points for further discussion, requiring to be drawn out in much greater detail, in light of the paper as a whole. I am indebted to a number of helpful reflections of Steve Motyer, in a brief, but frequently suggestive, book.⁶²

1 In thinking of and discussing the place of the Eucharist in the life of the church today we must concentrate afresh on the rite as "the meal which Jesus gave" and seek further to work out the implications of that for our Eucharistic theology and practice.

2 We must live with the mystery of the mode of Christ's presence in the Supper but also with the conviction of the reality of his presence with us. Our expectations in this regard must be high. Robert Bruce spoke of the way in which we receive the same Christ in Word and Sacrament; but in the Lord's Supper we get more of the same Christ. In the preaching of the Word, we get him, as it were between our thumb and forefinger; in the Supper, where all our senses are employed, we receive him in our whole hand.

3 The Supper is a family meal and the priesthood of all believers in the one family suggests that any Christian of good standing in the community (one who "walks the walk" as well as "talks the talk") may properly preside at the Eucharist.

4 As the Passover context suggests, all baptized adults and children should be permitted to participate. The practice of Eucharistic hospitality among all who are baptized, of whatever denomination, should be recognized as of dominical authority.

61 Schreiner, *op. cit.*, 733.

62 Steve Motyer, *Remember Jesus* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 1995).

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5 Serious consideration should be given to reinstating the ancient, and New Testament, practice of celebrating the Eucharist in the context of a love feast (*agape*).

6 Our sharing in the Eucharist should be pervaded with a spirit of joy and celebration, not of warning and gloom. While we are called to self-examination, abusive forms of “fencing the table,” with its regular majoring on the minors, successfully keeping many fearful souls away from the Lord’s Table who ought to be there, should be shunned. The great warning of 1 Cor. 11 is not about our (highly subjective) “spiritual experience” – so often really about power-play and shows of spiritual superiority, but with regard to holding our fellow-Christians in contempt by the way we treat them.

7 In saying all this, we must recognize seeking to move forward in well-grounded Eucharistic understanding and practice, we are where we are and must begin there. In the spirit of our Lord, and in the spirit of 1 Cor. 11, we have to wait for each other and seek to move forward together, maintaining all the time “the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace.”

Arguably, the Eucharist has been left too long in the hands of the theologians. They’ve not done too good a job with it, building the most elaborate and sophisticated sacramental structures on a foundation that was designed for something quite different. I think I can hear Paul calling out to the church today: *KISS* – not merely a reference to the sign of reconciliation so badly needed between our so-called communions. But *KISS* as a design principle noted by the US Navy in 1960: *Keep it simple stupid*. The principle states that most systems (including theological ones) work best if they are kept *simple* rather than made complicated; therefore simplicity should be a key goal in design and unnecessary complexity should be avoided. Our failure to keep it simple has led to so many painful and damaging divisions.

The late, great Alan Lewis spoke words of gracious but penetrating rebuke to the contemporary church which we all do well to heed. Referring to the weak, but powerful and unifying “word of the cross” (able, under God, to unify our cities, nations and the cosmos), he states that it “is just that word which we shamefully contradict and falsify when we enact sacraments of human unity within churches which are themselves unreconciled, and as the body of Christ itself dismembered and recrucified, not one at all but splintered and fractured beyond belief.” Sadly, our “sacramental actions mirror, and to often in history have added to, the world’s fragmentation, by leaving in place barriers which Christ’s baptism of death demolished, and by mocking his universal, messianic

banquet through withholding table fellowship from one another.”⁶³

Solemn and sobering words. Our responsibility and privilege in regard to the celebration of the Eucharist is mind-blowing. Leithart does not exaggerate when he says, “[The] Lord’s Supper is the world in miniature; it has cosmic significance.” What would it do for our celebration of the Eucharist if, on each occasion, we really grasped that “we are displaying in history a glimpse of the end of history and anticipating in this world the order of the world to come. Our feast is not the initial form of one small part of the new creation; it is the initial form of the new creation itself. And this means that the feast we already enjoy is as wide in scope as the feast that we will enjoy in the new creation. That is to say, it is as wide as creation itself.”⁶⁴

One of the most urgent tasks before the contemporary church is that of restoring to its proper place this Christ-given sacrament of our unity as Christians and, to that end, of reconnecting the social and theological dimension of the Eucharist, as a means towards the renewing of the church and the forward thrust of its mission. The church has still to discover the full richness and potential of this sacrament of new creation, as we work together for the building of our Lord’s kingdom today.

63 Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 394-5. T.F. Torrance regarded this work of Lewis as “the most remarkable and moving book I have ever read” (in his blurb for the book).

64 Leithart (2000), 15.