**Discerning the Body: Communion and Community in a time of Coronavirus.**

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**The Administration and Reception of Holy Communion**

*§12. If Holy Communion is received by the people of God in one kind only for a significant period of time, it will be important to acknowledge this change with some positive theological teaching. Equally, if some alternative to ‘one cup’ is adopted, the theological basis for this will need to be expounded.* How can we make theological sense of ‘the present necessity’? What biblical resources can we draw on?

1. **Theology in a time of “necessity”.** The symbolism of the common cup is precisely what makes it dangerous — its sociality and its materiality. The pandemic strikes at the very heart of the sacrament that bind us together as a Eucharistic community. “The present emergency” (or “necessity” as St Paul would have called it — 1 Cor 7.26) is likely to be with us for some time.

Paul has some interesting ideas on living in a time of uncertainty in 1 Cor 7. He has clear ideas on what is the ideal Christian lifestyle — but he also knows that it isn’t always possible ‘in the present necessity’. There is a wide range of practices which fall short of the ideal — but which are not sin and may be channels of holiness. To quote Pope Benedict, such practices ‘are not nothing’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. **The bread that we break: 1 Cor 10.16-17 and 11.17-34.**

***The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a* koinonia *[sharing, participation, fellowship, communion] in the body of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a* koinonia *in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Corinthians 10.16f).***

1 Corinthians 10-11 is the oldest testimony we have to the words of institution (11.23-26), to the material elements of the sacrament, and to its theological significance. Paul also draws some warning lines around the practice of the Corinthian church: it is possible to share bread and wine in a way that fails to “discern the Body” (11.29) and therefore is not “the Lord’s Supper” (11.20).

* 1 Cor 10.16f = a throwaway remark: a shared assumption, common ground that underpins everything else — not a theological novelty (like Phil 2.5-11).
* Key word = ***koinonia***(communion). Inherent duality: ***koinonia*** has both ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ aspects*.* Sharing implies *sociality:* those we share with become our partners in a common enterprise. But it also has an object: we are sharing in something outside ourselves, not simply focused on each other.
* These two dimensions of ***koinonia***lie at the heart of Paul’s understanding of the eucharist — and of the whole epistle. Belonging to the fellowship (***koinonia****)* of Christ (1.9) has both a vertical aspect (being in Christ) and a horizontal aspect (becoming partners with our brothers and sisters, fellow-members of the Body).
* Eucharistic ***koinonia*** combines the material and the spiritual. In sharing in the bread, worshippers are *sharing in* the body of Christ (11.24), united with Christ, participating in God — the ‘vertical’ dimension. But in the same act they are also *sharing with* their fellow-worshippers, becoming “one body” — the horizontal dimension. Integrally connected with Paul’s discussion of the Body of Christ in ch.12.
* There is a shocking materiality about this. The whole letter moves in and out of ‘body language’, from the fracturing of Christ’s body in chs 1-4 to the resurrection body in ch.15. The materiality of eating and drinking is essential to the eucharist.

In terms of our own material practice, Paul’s words leave several questions open.

* + *Eating and drinking what? What is the* ***material substance*** *of the elements? Does it have to be bread made from wheat and wine made from grapes? Or is that simply one of the ‘accidents’ of the time and place when Jesus and Paul were speaking? Should it be unleavened bread as at the Last Supper?*
  + *Breaking the* ***one loaf*** *plays a large part in the effectiveness of the analogy. Arguably, the use of individual wafers (long accepted in Anglican practice) loses this symbolic significance. Does this matter? If not, why not?*
  + *The symbolic significance of drinking from* ***one cup*** *plays a much smaller part in Paul’s argument (though it is implicit). The phrase ‘cup of blessing’ implies something like the ancient Jewish custom of Qiddush. But is it essential that the cup is physically passed around, or can the symbolism be conveyed in a different way? How does the cup differ from the loaf?*
  + *Incidentally, in 11.25 the cup is described as* ***“the new covenant in my blood”****. What difference does this make, and why?*
  + *Is “****symbolic significance****” the same as “****sacramental efficacy****”? Could we agree that the symbolism of the one bread/cup is an ideal, but one that can be dispensed with in emergencies without the loss of sacramental efficacy.*

1. **The horizontal dimension: one bread, one body**

***But in this I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For in the first place, when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you …. When you meet together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat: for in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. … Do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not. (1 Cor 11.17-22).***

One of the key advances in NT studies since the 1970s has been the rediscovery of the ‘social’ aspects of Pauline theology (Wayne Meeks; Abe Malherbe; Gerd Theissen; David Horrell; Dale Martin).[[2]](#footnote-2) So Theissen’s now-classic essay brings out the fact that in ch.11, Paul’s immediate concern is with the ‘horizontal’ dimension of the eucharist: ritual practices (still fluid at this stage) are evaluated in the light of their effectiveness in ‘building up the body’.

* What makes the difference between a private supper (*idion deipnon)* and ‘the Lord’s supper’ (*kuriakon deipnon*)? The problem is not ‘coming together’ (they’re doing that OK, vv.18, 20) but factions (18-19) and social divisions: failure to consider the needs of the poorer members of the community is destructive of Christian community at a very fundamental level (21-22).
* Paul speaks more generally here of ‘eating and drinking’ — the sociality of worship is not confined to the sacramental bread and wine. Every aspect of ‘coming together’ as a church needs to contribute to ‘building up the body of Christ’ (cf.14.12).
* This is certainly at least part of what Paul means by ‘discerning the Body’ in 11.29: failure to discern the whole community (not just my segment of it) as the Body of Christ undermines the efficacy of the Eucharist. This leads straight into the discussion of the Body in chs 12-14.

But how does Paul conceive the “one-ness” of the “one body”?

* Not a single table, but a shared meal in which all participate without social distinctions.
* Not a body without factions, but a body centred on Christ (11.19; 3.1-11).
* Not a socially homogeneous club, but an organism, a body that welcomes and transcends differences of class, gender and race (1.18-25; 12.13).
* Not a single congregation meeting in one house (Rom 16.23) but a fellowship that transcends time and place (1.2; 16.1-9, 19-20; Romans 16.1-2).

1. **The vertical dimension: sharers in the Body of Christ.**

**For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took [a loaf of] bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. 1 Cor 11.23-26**

But the nature of Christian *koinonia* is determined equally by its object: it’s not just ‘sharing’ that creates Christian ***koinonia*** butwhat we share in. We might compare Romans 14.4: horizontal ***koinonia*** is not possible without recognising the vertical relationship of each member of the Body to ‘his or her own master’***.*** So here Paul returns to the chain of apostolic tradition that connects the church’s Eucharist to the Last Supper.

Thistleton uses “communal participation” to translate *koinonia* ‘because “fellowship” is simply too bland. The “vertical” dimension of the relationship between believers and God is the fundamental basis for the “horizontal” relationship between fellow believers. The term denotes much more than social bonding …[It] underlines … the divine reality of the church as God’s people.’ This takes us back to the ‘one bread’ of 10.17: ‘There is a single, common ground of unity, a single basis of salvation, namely, the “broken” body of Christ, represented by **the bread which we break** and the shared **blood of Christ** (10.16).’ [[3]](#footnote-3)

* In ch.10 Paul is drawing on (and presupposing) the ancient understanding of sacrifice. The immediate context is ‘food offered to idols’ (chs 8—10). Sacrificial meals are both a way of *sharing in* the life of the gods and a potent means of *forming community* (10.18-22). The vertical dimension matters: eating makes you a ‘partner of the altar,’ for good or ill (10.19-22).
* This vertical dimension also has a temporal aspect, linking the present with the past in a chain of apostolic tradition. The dominical words of instruction in 11.23-32 link the church’s celebration with the Last Supper of the Gospels via an act of *anamnesis.* What the church does at the Eucharist is in obedient response to the saving acts to which Jesus points at the Last Supper: ‘my body, my blood, given for you.’
* As at the Passover, the act of remembrance is in turn an act of appropriation of the saving acts of God.Thiselton suggests that this is the significance of ‘proclaiming the death of the Lord (v.26): ‘Each participant declares, proclaims or preaches in the breaking of bread that *“Christ died,”* and in eating the bread and drinking from the cup that “Christ died *for me”: I appropriate* his death *for me;* I “take” Christ as “mine,” even as I take and receive broken bread and wine poured out.’[[4]](#footnote-4) It is not just the preaching of the word but the whole complex of sacramental actions, the rite itself, that ‘proclaims’ the Lord’s death.
* And this in turn has an eschatological aspect. The eucharist ties the church into God’s eschatological future: it is a ritual of hope. It refuses to let “the present necessity” dominate the horizon. The presence-in-absence of the sacrament points to the real presence of the Christ who comes.
* So the ‘vertical’ dimension of the eucharist points to the ‘vertical’ dimension of the church: called by God (1.2, 9, 26-30); called to holiness (1.2; 3.17); God’s temple, the dwelling-place of God’s Spirit (3.16-17; 6.19); God’s garden, God’s building (3.9); showered with the gifts of God’s Spirit (1.5, 30; 2.12-14; 4.8; 12—14); the place where God is actively at work (12.4-6); a place where the casual visitor may truly exclaim, “God is really among you” (14.25).
* And the materiality of the eucharist, the holiness of the body, points to the resurrection and the ultimate redemption of the whole created order in Christ (ch.15).

1. **A thoroughly biblical teaching on the Eucharist must do justice to both aspects of eucharistic practice, the ‘horizontal’ and the ‘vertical’.**

Because of the nature of the present “necessity,” because the pandemic directly challenges both the sociality and the materiality of the Eucharist, our regulations naturally tend to focus on the material and social difficulties. Congregations too struggle to hold onto the “spiritual” in the welter of regulations and restrictions, masks and hand sanitizers. There is a real danger that in our (laudable and correct) desire to focus on the practical problems of maintaining the ‘horizontal’ aspects of worship, we shall lose sight of the ‘vertical’ and offer our congregations a diminished and one-sided theology of the eucharist.

As a foil, let me finish with the framework offered by a classic ecumenical statement on the meaning of the Eucharist, from the WCC Lima Document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), pp.8-13.

BEM considers the meaning of the Eucharist under five headings. The bulk of this statement seeks to express the meaning of the Eucharist in terms of what I have called the ‘vertical’ relationship, expressed in Trinitarian terms: only one of the five is concerned with what I am calling the ‘horizontal’ or social aspect of communion.

* ***1. Thanksgiving to the Father****:* A great act of thanksgiving to the Father, in which the Church’s prayer (‘speaking on behalf of the whole creation’) is included within the intercession of Christ (§4).
* ***2. Anamnesis or Memorial of Christ:***As the memorial of the crucified and risen Christ, the living and effective sign of his unique and unrepeatable sacrifice, accomplished once and for all on the cross and still operative on behalf of all humankind’ (§5);
* ***3. Invocation of the Spirit:***The Spirit makes the crucified and risen Christ really present to us in the eucharistic meal, fulfilling the promise contained in the words of institution.
* ***4. Communion of the Faithful,***expressed in ‘the oneness of the sharers with Christ and with their fellow sharers in all times and places’ (§19); ‘reconciliation and sharing among all those regarded as brothers and sisters in the one family of God’ (§20); and ‘a constant challenge in the search for appropriate relationships in social, economic and political life’ (§20).
* ***5. Meal of the Kingdom:***The eucharist as the feast at which the Church joyfully celebrates and anticipates the coming of the Kingdom in Christ (I Cor. 11:26; Matt. 26:29), a foretaste of the divine rule which has been promised as the final renewal of creation. It brings into the present age a new reality which transforms Christians into the image of Christ and therefore makes them his effective witnesses. It is precious food for missionaries, bread and wine for pilgrims on their apostolic journey.

1. **Postscript. R. Johanan.**

Once Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai was leaving Jerusalem and Rabbi Joshua was following him. He saw the Temple destroyed. Rabbi Joshua said, Woe to us that the temple is destroyed— the place where the sins of Israel were atoned. He told him: My son, don’t be in sorrow, we have one atonement equal to it. It is charity, since it is said, ‘I desired charity not sacrifice’. (*Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, version 1, ch.4)*

A watershed moment in the life of the Jewish community — an emergency that became permanent. The loss of the Jerusalem Temple struck at the very heart of ancient Judaism. But Judaism found a way to survive — how?

* By skilful and perceptive leadership
* By drawing on the strategies of survival already embedded in scripture and tradition.[[5]](#footnote-5)
* By listening to the margins
* By allowing space for lament
* By constructing liturgies of hope.

1. Cited from +Pierre Whalon, ‘Digital or Physical? The debate around the celebration of the Holy Communion online,’ p.5: ‘I was privileged to take part in a conversation at the first audience of Pope Benedict XVI in 2005 with my then-colleague, the late Geoffrey Rowell, Bishop of Gibraltar in Europe (we were representing our two churches). Bishop Rowell inquired whether His Holiness still held to the opinion that John Calvin’s theology of the Eucharist is actually quite close to modern Roman Catholic theology. The Pope assured us that he did, and he added that even for “free” (nondenominational) churches, “the communion they celebrate is not nothing”.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The classic study is Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), ch.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Anthony Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2006), p.158. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thiselton, *1 Corinthians* p.185. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mark Brett and Rachelle Gilmour, ‘Worship in exile as an ‘essential service,’ <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/hebrew-bible-worship-in-exile-as-essential-service/12102306?fbclid=IwAR2oCMhx0YyIP_r7SVfY2tRGpycGETtkOzWMhS2Sh0wqPrRclw-SY1nANeQ> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)