

The Deacon's Mass: The Case for a Reappraisal

Introduction

It is no exaggeration that a great need in our Anglican Diocese of the Living Word (ADLW) churches is regular and sustained teaching that is first and foremost scriptural and grounded in the historic formularies. If we were to ask our members what do they think is happening when they receive the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, are we confident of their answers? A recent poll of active Roman Catholic members indicate that some 70 percent of Roman Catholics in the United States (and 66 percent in Ireland) do not believe in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, but rather a symbolic presence¹. The current trend is to prefer symbolic and memorialistic notions of the sacraments, in which there is a visible sign or symbol, but no present invisible reality. Most no longer think in terms of sacramental mysteries; visible sign and invisible reality have become estranged. Would ADLW members answer similarly? Should we do more to proclaiming and to explain this teaching? When we consider the understanding among our churches concerning the nature of the sacraments, particularly concerning extended communion and the nature of the ministerial office of deacon, we may suggest that the answer is a clear "Yes."

Why is this? The answers are complex and most are beyond the scope of a reappraisal of the Deacon's Mass. But in order to understand the present state of affairs concerning the practice it is important for us to realize first that there is this

¹ See "I Don't Believe The Eucharist is The Body of Christ. Am I Going to Hell?" In *Crux: Covering All Things Catholic*, February 23, 2015. http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2015/02/23/i-dont-believe-the-eucharist-is-the-body-of-christ-am-i-going-to-hell/?s_campaign=crux:email:daily accessed 03/09/15.

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unexamined “separation thinking” in our congregations between the visible, created realm and our invisible Creator, from whom the creation derives its very existence. Generations of post-Enlightenment thinking that have separated the material from the spiritual have left us at a considerable distance from where our forebears stood. When modern Christians succumb to this culturally conditioned assumption, it is difficult to understand God’s ordained intersection of the physical and spiritual that is intrinsic to God’s self-revelation in Word and sacrament. Thus the vertical relationship between God’s given means of grace and we his unworthy recipients has been overtaken by the horizontal relationship of the community gathered at the table. Second, there has been the erosion in the integrity of the ministerial offices themselves as a result of this separation. No longer *ministers* of God’s revealing presence specifically called and instituted in their offices according to his command, the presbyter and deacon are thought of in more pragmatic terms to meet the expectations of a local congregation on a Sunday. Third, as separation thinking shifts the ministerial office from God’s institution to a pragmatic express, the deacon’s and priest’s proper *vocational* office is at best misunderstood or worse, ignored simply because what deacons “do” and what priests “do” seem almost identical to the congregation.

The seriousness of the situation should not be underestimated or should the present *status quo* continue. The Prayer Book *Exhortation* rightly warns us that a failure to respect the integrity of the Lord’s sacrament *according to his ordinance* imperils the very souls of those who partake and of those who administer. As Don Carson said recently, “Corrupt worship replaces and relativizes God. Corrupt

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worship is not defined by the wrong style, but the wrong God.”² It is imperative that we reconsider our current practice concerning extended communion in a “Deacon’s Mass”. The problem in our ADLW parishes is not that we take the Lord’s Supper *too seriously*, it is that we do *not take the Lord’s Supper seriously enough*.

Essential Anglican Sacramental Thinking

To understand the wisdom of our Anglican forebears concerning sacraments and ministers, we must first understand their *sacramental thinking*. Marcus Peter Johnson’s *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* gives a clear summary for our study.³ Following Augustine, they believed that a sacrament is a “visible sign of an invisible reality.”⁴, thus the visible/physical *signs* of God’s creation refer to, and bring us to participate in, the *reality* to which they point, that is, the Lord Jesus Christ.⁵ They began with the incarnation of the eternal Word of God himself as God the Holy Trinity’s most astounding demonstration of his sacramental relationship to his creatures – in which God, *without ceasing to be God, became that which he created in order to mediate his personal presence*.⁶

As Johnson explains, Christians think sacramentally precisely because Christianity is rooted in the mystery of God as fully God and fully man. Christ

² “The Lord is There: Ezekiel 40-48” *The Gospel Coalition Conference, 2015* (Orlando: FL.) April 13, 2015.

³ M.P. Johnson, *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

⁴ St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*. 1.2.2, 2.1.1, 2.23, 2.3.4, *passim*.

⁵ *Johnson, op. cit.*, p. 214.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 215

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himself is the ultimate sacrament because in his full humanity and full deity, he is the saving intersection between God and us. He unites in his own person the visible and invisible. He is the visible image of the invisible God. God reveals himself and mediates himself through the Word become flesh. The Christ we are joined to in the hearing of the gospel is the same Christ we continue to receive in Word and sacrament. Just as Christ gave himself in the incarnation, and gives himself in his Word, he gives himself in his sacraments.⁷

The importance of this explication cannot be underestimated. It determines the trajectory of our Anglican forbears thinking. Salvation is an immediate and personal **union** by the believer with the living Christ – the Christ that is truly present to us through faith, in the gospel, by the power of the Spirit. The Father sends the Son for salvation, the Son becomes the agent of salvation in his union in humanity and the Holy Spirit makes his union effectual, first in Christ himself as the ultimate, then in believers when Christ comes to dwell in them by the Holy Spirit. Word and sacrament cannot be separated because they present Christ to us *equally*. There is no *lesser* presence of Christ. He cannot and must not be divided. The integrity of Word and sacrament **must** be maintained *because his person cannot be divided*.

When we begin with an understanding of salvation that is rooted in the mystery of our union with the incarnate, crucified, resurrected, living Christ, we are bound to think along similar and balanced lines concerning the presence of

⁷ *Ibid.*

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Christ in Word and sacrament. We can understand the logic of a balanced cycle of worship in Morning Prayer, Lord's Supper and Evensong. We can understand why salvation as an unmediated union with the Lord Jesus Christ through faith spoke so powerfully to our Anglican forebears. Our relationship with God is not through any mediated way of Church or priesthood. We stand immediately before God in our union in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Word and Sacrament: Both Sacramental

It is right to insist at this point that the preached Word and sacraments do not themselves constitute the presence of Christ to the church, but rather that Christ is the sacramental presence of God mediated directly to believers (through faith, by the power of the Holy Spirit) in Word and sacrament. They are *gifts of God for the people of God* that allows us continual participation in the one great sacrament: Jesus Christ himself.

The sacraments therefore *do not stand alone* but accompany and confirm the Word first communicated through preaching. This logical relationship may not be separated or its logical priority overturned. Apart from the preaching of the gospel, the sacraments would be empty, meaningless, objective signs. Thus the manner of reception by the believer must be addressed in terms of *how* the preaching and receiving the Word *establishes the structure* of the sacrament's nature and function.

When, where and how did Jesus assume that he would be personally present to join us to himself? The answer, as John 17 tells us, is that Christ is

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present in the apostolic enscripturated word that bears witness to him. When our Savior prays in John 17.20 for “...*those who will believe in me through their [the disciples] word...*” he prays that the result will be the unity of believers with the Father through the Son “...*just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they may also be in us.*” Preaching is no mere presentation *about* Christ, and neither is belief in Christ the mere reception of information *about* him. Preaching is the means of God's saving grace to those who receive him. It is the special work of God himself. Therefore, Christ is both truly presented and received in the preaching of the Word.⁸

When the gospel is properly preached, the sacrament makes clear to us *visibly* what has been offered to us *audibly*, or to put it another way, the sacrament “exegetes” the preached Word just as the preached Word “exegetes” the sacrament – and Christ is offered and received in both.⁹ Cranmer drew this parallel in the same way between God's working in his Word and his working in his sacraments:

*I say (according to God's word and the doctrine of the old writers) that Christ is present in his sacraments, as they teach that he is present in his word, when he worketh mightily by the same in the hearts of his hearers... this speech meaneth that he worketh with his word, using the voice of the speaker, as his instrument to work by; as he useth his sacraments, whereby he worketh, and therefore is said to be present in them.*¹⁰

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 223.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 218.

¹⁰ See Cranmer's *Defence* in J.E. Cox, *Writings and Disputations of Thomas Cranmer Relative to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper* (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1854) p. 11. The sacrament is the **adjunct** of the Word: ‘this faith God worketh inwardly in our hearts by his Holy Spirit, and

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Our Anglican forebears understood this doctrine at a depth and nuance that escapes notice today. They were converted *under their own ministries* as the Word of God became alive to them. They understood the correlation between the sign of human language, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the presence of Christ in his power that brought about their faith and conversion. They knew that the Word of God brought about their salvation, not just their actions in “mute” sacraments.

The Reformers did *not have a modern understanding* of the sermon as the *communication of information* from speaker to listener. The sermon *mediates* the very presence of Christ Himself. Luther was always concerned to stress the *importance* of the *preaching* of the written Word. He with Cranmer drew a parallel between the presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and the presence of Christ in the proclamation of the gospel: “The body which you receive [in the Lord's Supper], the Word which you hear [in the preaching of the gospel], are the body and Word of him who holds the whole world in his hand and who inhabits it from beginning to end.”¹¹ Preaching is not merely a spoken word *about* Christ; rather, it is “...an *offering* and *presentation* of Christ,” according to God's pure mercy.¹²

confirmeth the same outwardly to our ears by hearing of his word, and to our other senses by eating and drinking of the sacramental bread and wine in his holy Supper.’ *Defence*, p. 25. Cranmer understood the reality of Christ's presence by the Holy Spirit's power in the Word of God preached as the perquisite for his presence in the Supper. His chief concern was the integrity of Word and sacrament that is grounded in the integrity of the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the Lord's *ordinance*, we should not presume any further.

¹¹ *The Adoration of the Sacrament* [1523] in *Luther's Works*: vol. 36, ed. George W. Forell, gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, trans. Charles M. Jacobs, revised by George W. Forell (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), p. 298.

¹² *Answer to the Hyper-Christian Book* [1521], *LW* 39.183. *Italics* mine. See also J. Mark Beach, “The Real Presence of Christ in the Preaching of the Gospel: Luther and Calvin on the Nature of Preaching,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 10(1999), p. 77-134.

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The problem of separation thinking is separating the presence of Christ from the Word that testifies to him and the ministers of the Word who proclaim him so that that the proclamation of the gospel becomes a mere cerebral exercise in which the efficacy of God's Word is dependent upon the mental operation of the hearer. If our notions of the preached Word are non-sacramental, then surely the notion of the sacramental in the Lord's Supper, and most seriously in Christ himself as incarnate Word, will dissolve as well. Is it no wonder that a docetic Christology, combined with rationalistic self-help topical preaching and a semi-Pelagian view of salvation is prevalent in modern American evangelicalism? As T.H.L. Parker once observed, churches that tend to have a memorialistic or symbolistic view of the Lord's Supper – that is, those that view Christ as present merely symbolically in the experience of the faithful – also tend toward a non-sacramental view of preaching.¹³ When we lessen the affirmation that Christ is himself the chief benefit conveyed by the preaching of his Word, we will be tempted to relegate it elsewhere! In historic Reformation Anglicanism, the doctrine of the true, spiritual presence of Christ in the sacraments flowed directly from their belief in the true, spiritual presence of Christ in the Word. This is why our forbears placed priority on the Word of God preached and rightly rejected an understanding of the sacraments as efficacious in a purely “singular” way. Such a singular understanding is a violation of the gospel logic that undergirds the sacraments. In Anglicanism, the preached Word is the instrument ordained by

¹³ Parker, T.H.L., *Calvin's Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, rpt. 1992) p. 22.

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God to make us aware of our need and to bring us to salvation as he unites us with Christ.

Christ's Gospels Meal

The Lord's Supper is Christ's "gospel" meal. This nuance is critical if we are to preserve the balance between Word and sacrament and protect the integrity of the ministerial offices. If our salvation depends on an intimate and profoundly real union with the incarnate, crucified, risen, living person of Jesus Christ, then it is necessary that Christ be equally present to us in his Word and his sacrament. If our ongoing salvation depends on the continual and growing communion we have with the Lord, then it is also necessary that Christ be ever-present in that same Word: the Word preached and received by the church in faith and the sacrament administered according to Christ's ordinance and received by the church in faith.

The preaching of the gospel is the necessary context for the sacraments, lest the sacraments are left to "hang in the air," robbed of the reality to whom they point. It is not a choice between preaching Word over sacrament or sacrament over preaching. The preached Word sets the sacrament in its proper context and purpose. The preaching of the Word is a holy and awesome affair, for Christ dwells among his people through the preaching of the gospel. But no less holy and awesome are the sacramental signs and seals that *accompany* and *support* the preached gospel Word. The Lord's Supper is the Word of God made visible by sign of bread and wine, apprehended by the senses of those who receive in faith and are

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thereby strengthened and supported into further union with Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So we must ask, “Do we have a sacramental understanding of the true, spiritual presence of Christ in the preached Word? Is there a balance given in our services to the Word and sacrament? Do our congregations understand that there is equal worship in Matins and the Lord's Supper or has a service of the Ministry of the Word been *downgraded* to a lesser order? Do they value the *dignity* of ministers as the bearers of God's saving Word to us?”

We must also ask ourselves, “Has our symbolic view of the Lord's Supper the significant contributor to the low view of preaching in our churches today?” “What is the quality of our preaching?” Clearly it must be expository of God's Word. It must be clear. And it must have the glorifying of Christ's person and work as its object. We should expect that in the preaching of God's Word, God himself speaks and is present to us through his Son in the power of the Spirit to bless and nourish us. We should expect that preaching is ultimately a mysterious, sacramental act in which Christ is truly present. We must expect much more of our preaching!

Concerning Ministers

Having reestablished a balanced Word-sacrament relation and restored our forebears sacramental thinking in the astonishing reality that God himself is presented to us in the Word preached and sacrament administered, we can well understand the seriousness of God's command concerning them and in his

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provision of specific ministers to his church for their administration. There is a singularity here in his call to worship and his call to ministers. Ministerial orders are not the result of a particular context, but have been established and instituted by God in such a way that his gospel may be proclaimed faithfully and his sacraments given in sanctification of those who partake faithfully.

There is therefore, in marked contrast to the description of the office of deacon in the *Ordinal*, a depth in the exhortation and in the examination of priests. There is a *dignity* and an importance to this office. The priest is to be the minister in the Word and sacrament. We can see the same logical priority of the Word in the opening sentences of the exhortation: priests stand as watchman, messengers and stewards of the Lord, teaching and providing for the Lord's family.

In the same way that there is the integrity in Word and Sacrament itself, there is the integrity of Word and Sacrament in the priestly office itself. Consider the language of the 1552/1662 *Ordinal* Exhortation to the priest:

...consider how studious ye ought to be in reading and learning the Scriptures, and in framing the manners both of yourselves, and of them that specially pertain unto you, according to the rule of the same Scriptures.

... and that you will continually pray to God the Father, by the mediation of our only Saviour Jesus Christ, for the heavenly assistance of the Holy Ghost; that, by daily reading and weighing of the Scriptures, ye may wax riper and stronger in your ministry; and that ye may so endeavour

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*yourselves from time to time to sanctify the lives of you and yours, and to fashion them after the rule and doctrine of Christ...*¹⁴

When we consider the seven examination questions in the rite that follows the exhortation, the majority focus on the ministry of the Word that is the priest's unique charge. After the first question concerning the sufficiency of the Scriptures themselves, the question the priest's responsibility of the three marks of the church in doctrine, sacrament and discipline, as God has commanded:

*Will you then give your faithful diligence always so to minister the doctrine and sacraments, and the discipline of Christ, as the Lord hath commanded, and as this Church and Realm hath received the same, according to the commandments of God; so that you may teach the people committed to your cure and charge with all diligence to keep and observe the same?*¹⁵

It is the priest that is ordained to minister the truth of God's Word and administer his sacraments that "*fashions* them [the local congregation] after the *rule and doctrine* of Christ". Therefore, when he enters the pulpit, he is to speak and apply the Words of Christ to His people. When he stands at the table, he is to support this Word ministry at prayer in the Lord's Supper's visible sign. When he admonishes and disciplines, it is according to God's command and for the protection of God's people. We need the grace of Christ's Word poured down upon

¹⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer and the Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church according to the use of The Church of England, 1662* (Cambridge: University Press, 2004) p. 574-75.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 576.

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us in the power of the Holy Spirit in the preaching, we need the grace of Christ's sacraments to confirm his Word, and we need to protect the integrity of both because they proceed from *outside* of us. The person of Christ is truly and spiritually present in the pure Word of God and in the sacraments administered according to Christ's ordinance.

With the proper sacramental character of both Word and Sacrament reestablished, we must now ask ourselves, "May a deacon assume some form of presidency at the Lord's Supper?" The answer is in the nearly identical wording of the *Ordinal* 1552/1662. The Bishop's examination describes the diaconal office in a question made to the diaconal candidate. Here is 1662:

It appertaineth to the office of a Deacon, in the Church where he shall be appointed to serve, to assist the Priest in Divine Service, and specially when he ministereth the holy Communion, and to help him in the distribution thereof, and to read holy Scriptures and Homilies in the Church; and to instruct the youth in the Catechism; in the absence of the Priest to baptize infants; and to preach, if he be admitted thereto by the Bishop. And furthermore, it is his office, where provision is so made, to search for the sick, poor, and impotent people of the Parish, to intimate their estates, names, and places where they dwell, unto the Curate, that by his exhortation they may be relieved with the alms of the Parishioners, or others.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 565.

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We can see from the description that a deacon *assists* the priest *while* he ministers the Lord's Supper. The deacon's assistance is made very specific: in distribution of the elements, in reading the scriptural lessons or the homilies. There is brevity in the description we do not find in the ordination of priests. And in the two areas of possible overlap between the offices, the description is hedged in terms of an extraordinary provision. The Bishop's permission must be sought *before* a deacon is to baptize or to preach when a priest is not available for a limited period. The description then continues to describe the deacon's office of catechesis and his ministry of mercy to the members of the congregation. Because the priest's office is one of both Word and Sacrament (and its consequential exhortation and discipline) *The Ordinal* assumed that accountability remains with the priestly office.

There can therefore be no justification made for the deacon "standing alone" as it were, without the priest present in the Lord's Supper or that the words "*assist the Priest in the divine service, and specially when he ministereth the holy Communion, and to help him in the distribution thereof...*" can mean that the deacon may preside in his absence. It is also important to note how preaching God's Word in diaconal ministry is *conditional* and *extraordinary* and not the ordinary or regular diaconal office.¹⁷ We could well ask why there is such an

¹⁷ According to Hooker there is a sharp distinction between presbyters and deacons. Remembering that initially the Apostles used the term presbyter in referring to themselves as the "fatherly guides" of the Church, which office was instituted directly by Jesus *before* His Ascension, whilst the office of deacon were established by the Apostles *after* His Ascension. Thus the office of deacon was established to assist and help the presbyterate which was the prior office. *Laws* V.78.3-5. This if we take the evidence of Acts 2.42 and 6.4 alongside Hooker's analysis, we can see the unity of Word/sacrament in the *singular* office is Christ's own

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emphasis on a deacon's liturgical duties among ADLW congregations? To what extent have we made room or provision for the deacon's more biblical pastoral office in his ministry of mercy among the congregation? Is it not time to set out clearly the details of the vocational priest and deacon?

Conclusion

In this paper I have followed the sacramental thinking of historic Reformation Anglican in Christ's incarnation and the believer's union in Christ with the resultant integrity in the priest's ministerial office of Word and sacrament. It is this underlying theology that has provided the structure for the nature and duties in the office of priest and deacon explained in the Ordinal. The weight of evidence has led me to conclude that the practice of the Deacon's Mass confuses the integrity of the priestly office and neglects the essential character of the diaconate. I thereby recommend that parishes reconsider their current practice in light of this evidence and that the practice should be discontinued within a timeframe that allows sufficient space for doctrinal teaching and that is pastorally sensitive to individual ADLW parishes.

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Eastertide 2015 (rev. 2019)

ordinance. It seems to me therefore that there is a hierarchy in the Ministry that is a hierarchy of service and not of power as both presbyters and deacons are both there to serve God. We are not to confuse the offices.