MISSION
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CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture

THE COMMUNION OF SINNERS

Based on Nighthawks *by Edward Hopper, 1942*

RETHINKING COMMUNION

08// Anthony Clarke reflects on his extensive study of Baptist theory and practice, arguing for inclusion.

THE COMMUNION OF SINNERS

COULD WE BE BRAVER AND MORE FAITHFUL WITH COMMUNION?

Debates about Communion usually focus on two important areas – the nature of the event, and the question of who can participate.

The nature of the event will involve considerations such as what we believe about the bread and wine. At one end of the spectrum, the Roman Catholic position is that the elements become the body and blood of Christ – transubstantiation. At the other end, Communion is seen as an act of 'mere' remembrance, with many variations between.

Then there is the question of who can receive the bread and wine, often a distinction between those who believe and are baptised and those who believe but have not been baptised. This issue of *Mission Catalyst* touches on most of these areas.

But here is a new question – well, reasonably new. Why is it assumed that Communion is only for believers?

The gospel accounts include the disciples only, but amongst them was Judas who was about to betray Jesus. Should he have been excluded? Presumably not.

Then there's 1 Corinthians 11, so often read at the Communion table, but starting from verse 23, thereby omitting the all-important context that starts at verse 17.

Nonetheless, "do this in remembrance of me" (v24) and "as often as you do this you proclaim the Lord's death" (v26). Surely this can only be for Christians! No, this tells you why Communion is celebrated, not who can take and eat.

But it says, "whoever eats or drinks in an unworthy manner..." (v27). Yes, and in the context of the Corinthian Church they were doing so, getting drunk and not sharing the food (v21). The key phrase here is 'an unworthy manner'. It should not be translated 'unworthily' as the Authorised Version translated it, as if our worthiness is a qualification to partake. The whole point is that we are not worthy. No-one is!

As Gordon Fee (in his NICNT commentary on 1 Corinthians) says: "The tragedy of such an interpretation for countless thousands, both in terms of a foreboding of the table and guilt for perhaps having partaken unworthily, is incalculable."

Look at it like this. How likely is it that Jesus, who so often used meals to include those who were outsiders, envisaged a meal that excluded people? Even today, Gentiles can share in a Passover meal!

Does it seem reasonable that Jesus would eat with Levi and a host of other sinners (Luke 5: 29), or the hated Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 5), then ask us to keep from the feast those who are not yet members of the family?

Would Jesus say to the host of a meal he was enjoying that next time he should "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind... and you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14: 13), then have it in mind that the Church should fence the Communion table?

Now, there are serious theological arguments for restricting access to Communion. But if we believe new truth can still break through from God's word, which we do, dare we allow our prophetic imagination to see something potentially new here?

If this is true, can you imagine how we could wonderfully renew our understanding of Communion? To see it as a feast where we invite our neighbours and friends to share our food and, at the heart of it, break bread and drink wine, explain what it's about and invite them to take part. Imagine the creative liturgies that could emerge!

What about Communion on the streets? Could we find a way of allowing complete strangers to stop, examine themselves, and take bread and wine as symbols of God's desire to nourish them? Now that's a meal Jesus might just come to.

David Kerrigan
General Director

Letters Welcome

In the next issue of the magazine we're introducing, for the first time, a letters page. Send your thoughts on the articles and ideas in this issue (or your views on the magazine generally) to catalyst@bmsworldmission.org

If published, your letter may be edited for length or style. Brevity is the soul of wit. Witty letters welcome.

Sara Miles
Founder of The Food Pantry in San Francisco. Her story of conversion through Communion is told in her book, Take This Bread

Food Pantry founder Sara Miles at St Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. © Food Pantry

REAL BREAD: COMMUNION AND HOSPITALITY

CONVERTING AT COMMUNION, SARA MILES LEARNED TO SEE A FOOD BANK NOT AS SOCIAL ACTION BUT AN EXTENSION OF THE LORD'S TABLE

Until I converted, unexpectedly, in middle age, I thought being a Christian was all about belief. I didn't actually know any Christians, but I was sure they believed in the virgin birth, for example, as an intellectual proposition, the same way I believed in photosynthesis or germs.

But then, in an experience I still can't logically explain, I walked into a church for no earthly reason. The altar in the centre of the sanctuary was inscribed, in gold letters, with words I'd never seen before: a quote from the gospel of Luke: "This guy eats with sinners," and another from the 7th century mystic, Isaac of Nineveh: "Did not the Lord eat with publicans and harlots? Therefore make no distinction between worthy and unworthy; all must be equal in your eyes to love and to serve." As I stood there during Communion, a stranger handed me a chunk of bread. Eating it, I knew it to be real bread, made out of flour and water and yeast – and I also knew that God, named Jesus, who I didn't believe in, was alive.

That first Communion knocked me upside down. Faith turned out not to be abstract at all, but material and physical. I'd thought Christianity was about angels and superstition and being good. Instead, I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are honoured.

Unbelieving, I came to realise that God is revealed not only in bread and wine during Communion, but whenever we share food with others – particularly with strangers. I began to understand that the fruits of creation are for everyone, without exception – not something to be doled out to insiders, or only to the deserving.

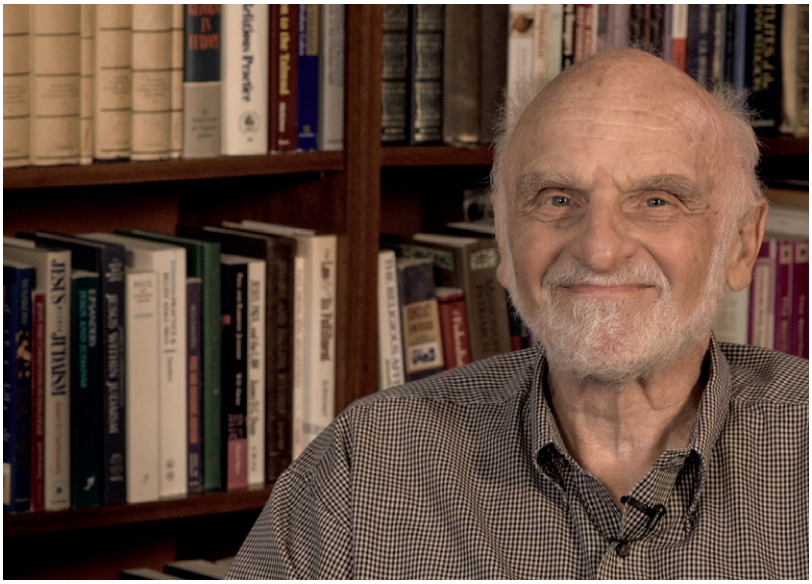
So, over the objections of some of my fellow parishioners at the church I landed in, I started a food pantry right in the centre of the sanctuary, where we gave away literally tons of oranges and potatoes and cereal around the same altar where I'd first eaten the body of Christ. We gave food to anyone who showed up. I met thieves, child abusers, millionaires, day labourers, politicians, schizophrenics, gangsters and bishops – all blown into my life through the restless power of a call to feed people as I had been fed.

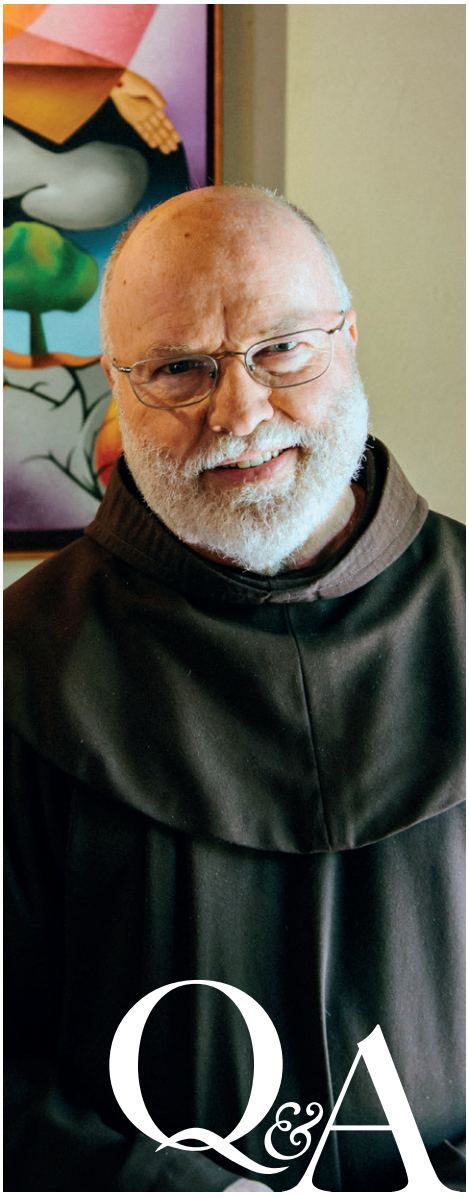
At the pantry, serving over five hundred strangers a week, I confronted the same issues that had kept me from religion in the first place. Like church, the food pantry asked me to leave certainty behind. It tangled me up with people I didn't particularly want to know, and scared me with its demand for more faith than I was ready to give.

My new vocation didn't turn out to be as simple as going to church on Sundays and declaring myself 'saved'. Nor did it mean talking kindly to poor folks and handing them the occasional sandwich from a sanctified distance. I had to trudge in the rain through housing projects, sit on the kerb wiping the runny nose of a psychotic man, take the firing pin out of a battered woman's pistol and stick the gun in a cookie tin in the back of my car. I had to struggle with my atheist family, my doubting friends, and the prejudices and traditions of my newfound church.

But I kept learning how hunger can lead to more life – that by sharing real food I could keep finding connection, through Christ, with the most unlikely people. That by eating a piece of bread I could experience myself as part of one body. And so I have faith in Communion: that by opening ourselves to strangers, we will taste God.

You can read more about Sara Miles at **saramiles.net** and the Food Pantry at **thefoodpantry.org**





Q&A

BRUEGGEMANN VOLF • ROHR

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, MIROSLAV VOLF AND RICHARD ROHR ARE THINKERS FROM DIFFERENT TRADITIONS, THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS AND PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES – AND THEY ARE ALL DEEPLY INFLUENTIAL WITHIN THE BODY OF CHRIST. THE THREE 2014 CATALYST LIVE SPEAKERS ANSWERED QUESTIONS ABOUT COMMUNION FOR MISSION CATALYST.

MIROSLAV VOLF
Theologian and public intellectual

Should Communion, the Eucharist, be a badge of membership or should it be open to anybody, whether they are within the Church or not, believers or not?

I think that the nexus of Communion and baptism is very important to keep, so that Communion is not a kind of indiscriminate meal, with invitation to all. It is a meal of those who have been part of the body of Christ. It doesn't mean that others are discriminated against, it simply means that Communion is not a modality of evangelism or that Communion isn't the space that the Church is, where anybody can be welcomed. It presumes a certain relationship to Christ, I think.

> *"COMMUNION PRESUMES A CERTAIN RELATIONSHIP TO CHRIST"*
>
> **VOLF**

There is often a heavy emphasis on explaining that there is nothing special or transcendently powerful in the waters of baptism, or the elements of Communion. Do we lose something when we do that?

Yes, I think it ends up being superfluous. If there is nothing in that water, if there is no connection, if we evacuate even the symbolic dimension of it and it's just water, why do we use water? Why can't I replace it with something else? I think the sense of proper sacramentality is important to keep.

> *"TREATING COMMUNION AS REWARDS FOR GOOD BEHAVIOUR IS AT THE HEART OF THE HERESY OF THE CHURCH"*
>
> **ROHR**

RICHARD ROHR
Franciscan Catholic author and speaker

Across the Christian Church, the table, the Eucharist, has been used as a way of defining who is in and who is out. What do you think Jesus would have thought of our use of the table for defining membership?

This is so clear in the scriptures, especially Luke's gospel. In every single meal setting in Luke, Jesus is either eating with the wrong people, inviting a woman into a male symposium meal, not washing his hands or not eating the right food. There is no sense that the meal – table fellowship as we now call it – was used to define membership or superiority. In fact, quite the opposite. He uses the meal to be inclusive, to invite the outsider. Even the stories that we're all familiar with, that we call the multiplication of loaves or fish – the image there is of abundance, of plenty for everybody. What is the point of mentioning the seven baskets and twelve baskets being left over except to say: 'there is plenty for everybody and there is no checklist about who gets it and who doesn't'?

I'm not saying we should cheapen the meal and say it means nothing, but we Catholics often say [about the Eucharist] that 'the Protestants don't understand' and I say: 'do *you* understand? Do *you* think you begin to understand the mystery of presence?' They say: 'they're not worthy.' And I say: 'are *you* worthy?'

In fact, the verse we use before we approach the altar is from the gospel: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof. Say the word and my soul will be healed." So we all publicly say in a loud voice, 'Lord I am not worthy,' and then we walk up as if we're worthy. So our own words convict us. But most people don't observe ritual enough to see that it's often filled with contradictions.

Our wonderful Pope Francis has said that the sacraments may no longer be used as 'prizes for the perfect'. They are 'medicine for those who need healing'. But we have turned that around, we have turned medicine for the journey, for the unworthy because we need help, into rewards for good behaviour – I would say that this is at the heart of the heresy of the Church. And this is accepted heresy – people don't call it heresy, but it's pure heresy – which appeals to the ego. Things that appeal to the ego, where you define people as higher and lower, for some reason those are never called heresy.

In the Protestant traditions we seem to have a very uneasy relationship with ritual. Something like the doctrine of transubstantiation is particularly troubling to many Protestants. What are your thoughts on it?

Transubstantiation is a term from 13th century scholastic philosophy. The Church has no competence or authority to impose a philosophical position as if it's the gospel. Transubstantiation is a philosophical definition that appealed to a certain mind in a certain century to try to explain the 'how' of [the Eucharist] but to try to also hold on to the real.

And here I'd be very conservative Catholic. Incarnation has to be real. Spirit can take matter as its revelation place. The physical world is the

revelation place of God. We see it in the body of Jesus, I see it in the body of Christ, we see it in the body of the Eucharist. Paul saw that very clearly.

I believe in Real Presence. Capital R, capital P. That God is either present in the physical world or the game's over. That's Christianity. That's our trump card. That's incarnation. So Catholicism was right on, I believe, in insisting on real presence.

So in the same moment I'm probably sounding very conservative and very rebellious. I hope I'm just orthodox.

Incarnation is incarnation. From Jesus to the human person to the creation itself. And in the Eucharist we focus that, we struggle with it, distil it into one moment. If you say it's just a symbol, well then the divinisation of the human person is maybe just a symbol. Then maybe I'm not really the body of Christ? No.

I think Protestantism fought some battles it didn't need to fight, and overreacted, as reformations always do: they threw out the baby with the bathwater. If we could state it a little more healthily, and you could stop reacting against our unhealthy statement, I think we could find what Jesus clearly talks about in John's gospel. If people are going to say they love the scriptures, then [they should hear Jesus when he says:] "my flesh is real food" for the life of the world.

He is bringing this whole mystery of presence to the material, physical level. He doesn't say think about it, he doesn't say argue about it, he says eat it. You know it the way you love your wife. You don't know that in your head, you know that in your body.

Could the eternal Christ be present in a physical moment of material bread and wine? If not, why not?

So I am very Eucharistic. I think if we didn't have such a ritual as Eucharist, we'd have to create it, it's so perfect for the message we want to share it with everybody. But there's the problem: we didn't share it with everybody. We decided who was worthy and who wasn't. Which ruined the whole message.

Presence is more subtle than imposing a 13th century philosophical definition. It's amorphous, it's cellular, it's relational. But theology often didn't know how to deal with the subtlety of presence.

And so it came up with transubstantiation.

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

Old Testament scholar and theologian

In our desire as Protestants to differentiate ourselves from Catholic practice, we often strongly emphasise the ordinariness of rituals like Communion and baptism. Have we lost anything in so doing?

I think we have. I think the two dangers are on the one hand to make it so ordinary that it carries no force, or on the other hand to treat it like it's magic. And to find a way between those is very difficult. I am very much informed about that by a book by William Cavanaugh, a Roman Catholic scholar. He wrote that the Roman Catholic bishops in Chile finally figured out that the Eucharist was the main antidote to Pinochet's torture and violence, because what the Eucharist does is to create communities of trusting, shared disciples. So I think we have to recover the public political economic significance without engaging in liturgic magic, because the Eucharist is a performance of the abundance of God in a society that is preoccupied with scarcity. It is a very countercultural activity. But I think it has become so routinised that its symbolic force has largely been emptied. And therefore I think many people come to the Eucharist with very privatised notions of 'getting right with Jesus' rather than seeing that it is a public declaration of an alternative way of being in the world. I think high Church liturgy people and low Church people can work at that together. Because it really has to do with the interpretive lens through which we think about our worship.

> *"THE EUCHARIST IS A PERFORMANCE OF THE ABUNDANCE OF GOD IN A SOCIETY THAT IS PREOCCUPIED WITH SCARCITY"* ***BRUEGGEMANN***

Should people who do not yet believe in Jesus be allowed to share in the Eucharist?

That's a disputed question. In my Church, the United Church of Christ, we have a very significant African American population, and their tradition is to call the Communion table the 'welcome table'. And I suppose people who have been as marginalised as African Americans are not going to be too busy setting up [those kinds of] standards and norms, but everybody's welcome. And I incline in that direction. I incline to think that everybody ought to have access to the alternative world of abundance and reconciliation. So we don't have to 'qualify'. But I worship at an Episcopal church and our bishop is fairly stringent on wanting to guard the table against easy access. So I'm a little unsettled about it, but that's my tilt, that the goodness of God overwhelms all of our capacity to qualify.

Our different 'tilts' on the Eucharist can seem quite confusing to people, I think. On one hand, we tell people there is absolutely nothing special about the elements, but on the other hand if you take it in an unworthy manner, God will kill you.

[laughs] That's right! And clearly many people in the Church who take Communion – and we each have our own list of who they are – are unworthy and eat and drink unworthily. As unworthily as any outsider might, so who knows?!

When the Eucharist has become 'too ordinary', when we are not engaged, is there still value in doing it, regardless of how we feel?

I think so. That's exactly right. If you think of the analogue of the family evening meal around the table, you don't have to feel like being there. You just do it and, in the very process of doing it, one is reinforced in the understanding that this is my family and I belong to this family and I have obligations to this family and so on. You just do it. One of my teachers used to say the wonderful thing about the Church is that when you cannot believe this stuff, somebody else is doing that for you, and you can count on that.

Miroslav Volf, Walter Brueggemenn and Richard Rohr were talking to Jonathan Langley.

Helen Dare
Minister of Broad Haven Baptist Church, co-editor (with Simon Woodman) of The 'Plainly Revealed' Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice, *Helen delivered the 2014 Whitley Lecture on* 'Always on the way and in the fray: Reading the Bible as Baptists'.

THE TABLE OF THE LORD: FREE FOR ALL?

CAN WE FIND MIDDLE GROUND BETWEEN EXCLUSION AND FREE-FOR-ALL IN COMMUNION?

In his plea to King James I for freedom of conscience in matters of religion, Thomas Helwys claimed: "If the King have authority to make Spiritual Lords and Laws then he is an immortal God and not mortal man." The early Baptists were led by their reading of Scripture to a different understanding of ecclesiology, which they believed they should be free under God to exercise. Yet what about Communion? What role does individual conscience under God have in relation to access to the table?

The new and controversial practices of the early Baptists resulted in exclusion from civic society and the risk of persecution. When an individual was ready to commit to this way of following Jesus, with its concomitant risks, then he or she could join the community of faith and share in its special meal. The order was simple: baptism then Communion. Yet what about in contemporary Britain, where most people are largely indifferent to our religious choices and where people may be part of a worshipping community, join small groups and assist in varying tasks without being formal 'members'? Some who gather will be baptised in other traditions. Some will be fully committed, others will be struggling with the ethical implications of being a disciple of Christ. Should anyone present during a service be able to take Communion?

Many of our churches have a plurality of opinions represented within their congregations. Some of us are reluctant to have a fully open table, believing that an inappropriate free-for-all will ensue. It is important that people are clear concerning their readiness for this special and solemn meal and can demonstrate this in their behaviour. Others, however, are reluctant to impose boundaries, believing that individual conscience should prevail. Fencing the table explicitly through clear words, or not offering elements to some such as youth, or implicitly through cleverly worded 'invitations' (that can sound decidedly uninviting) are seen as barriers to individual freedom. How might we prevent these differences becoming divisive?

> "CLEVERLY WORDED 'INVITATIONS' CAN SOUND DECIDEDLY UNINVITING"

For the early Baptists, freedom was not merely the individual's right to make his or her own autonomous choices. Rather, freedom was discovered as an individual was called by God and bound together with others under the Lordship of Christ. Baptists have not denied the role of humans in organising church practices, but do so under the direct authority of Christ. The primary allegiance of an individual is to Jesus as Lord, yet the implications of this are discerned communally. Baptism and Communion both offer the opportunity for the public confession that Jesus is Lord. The former is a one-off event, but the latter a repeated opportunity to draw a line under the past and determine to live God's way in the future. We change our focus from who is in and who is out and replace it with a mutually supportive experience of discipleship.

There may be occasions when an individual self-excludes from Communion because he realises that he cannot yet say 'Jesus is Lord' with sufficient authenticity. That may be an initial faith decision, or it may be in regard to a recognised failure in an area of discipleship. The alternative is that he may wish to use Communion as an opportunity to take the next step in following Jesus, or even a first step. This approach invites participants to 'examine themselves', but in relation to growing in faith and improving behaviour rather than to an attainment of a certain level of faith or behaviour often predetermined by others.

Acknowledging that those who gather with us around the table are all struggling with various aspects of becoming more like Christ in our thoughts, words and deeds may offer a way forward for those with differing opinions concerning inclusion and exclusion at Communion. Understanding Communion as an opportunity for saying 'Jesus is Lord' creates a situation that is neither a free-for-all nor an exclusive privilege. It is rather an opportunity to support one another in moving forward and inviting others to join us in our discipleship.

Anthony Clarke
Tutor in pastoral studies and community learning, Regent's Park College Oxford and author of Communion, 'A Feast for All? Rethinking Communion for the Contemporary Church'.

WHO IS INVITED?

RETHINKING COMMUNION

THE AUTHOR OF A MAJOR BAPTIST STUDY ON COMMUNION SHARES ITS HIGHLIGHTS

Church was always a major part of life for me when growing up, even on holiday. I remember visiting a small village church as a family – it was probably the late 1970s. The service, led by a lay-preacher, concluded with Communion, and my father, a Baptist minister, was asked if he would lead this. As he walked up to the front, Mum quietly ushered us three children out. There may have been all sorts of good reasons why we left at that point and went for a walk, but the memory has stayed with me, and it is a memory of exclusion. The question of who is invited to share around the Lord's table is a personal and emotional issue as well as a biblical and theological one.

Baptist practice has changed significantly over the last 400 years. The strong and dominant view in the 17th century was that Communion was for those baptised as believers, essentially restricting participation to known members. There were minority voices, most famously John Bunyan, who argued to open the table for other Christians, but the general position was clear. The question became more controversial in the 18th and early 19th centuries, and again centred on whether those who were committed evangelical Christians, baptised as infants in the Church of England, were welcome at a Baptist table. The bitter disputes led to an 'open' table becoming the norm. Again there were slightly more radical voices – John Wesley for example speaks of Communion as being a 'converting ordinance', although in a context of nominal participation in the state Church through infant baptism.

In the latter part of the 20th century, fresh questions emerged around participation, shaped both by the children within Church and the renewed understanding of the Church's missional call. The demise of afternoon Sunday schools and the development of 'Family Church' brought children into the heart of Sunday services (and so raised similar questions for other denominations), and rethinking patterns of believing

> *"THE PROCLAMATION OF THE LORD'S DEATH IS A DEATH FOR THE OTHER, THE MARGINALISED"*

and belonging mitigated against very clear church boundaries, as those on the fringes were encouraged to grow into faith. This has led to uncertainty and a variety of responses. The first Baptist Basics leaflet published in the 1990s insists that Communion is for the believer and normally follows baptism as a believer, and it is unusual for children even to be present and certainly to partake.

The recent publication in 2010 of *Gathering Around the Table: Children and Communion* responds to the growing number of churches wrestling with this question, offering a variety of creative responses.

This desire to include others, whether children already within the wider church or those currently on, or beyond, the fringe of the church, raises theological questions about Communion in a very acute way, especially its relationship with baptism. In addition, practice often precedes significant theological reflection, and the desire not to exclude leads churches to adopt a more inclusive practice, perhaps in a theological vacuum. There is thus a pressing need to think seriously again about a Baptist theology and practice of Communion, which will explore the biblical and theological issues involved.

Biblical insights

When looking at the New Testament material we might categorise it in three ways:

- the practice of Jesus in the gospels
- the teaching of Jesus in the gospels
- the practice and teaching of the Early Church in Acts and the letters

The latter of these has focused significantly on 1 Corinthians 11, where we might make two initial comments. First, we have tended to privilege this passage, and so read the rest of the New Testament in the light of the meaning found here. This need not be the case, and this article argues for a greater place for the gospel material in our overall theology of Communion. Secondly, we always run the risk of interpreting a particular passage in the light of current practice and so missing a significant aspect of the original meaning. In 1 Corinthians, Paul is addressing significant issues within the group of believers rather than any sense of boundaries between the Church and others.

The practice of Jesus

Meals were both a vital part of first century life and also of the gospel writers' presentation of Jesus, and these include accounts of Jesus at table with others, which are used to draw attention to the company he kept, those accounts which also seem deliberately to prefigure or echo the meal at the Last Supper, and then the Last Supper itself.

Whether Levi or Zacchaeus or the woman at the well, in a clear and challenging distinction from expected

behaviour, Jesus refuses to construct fences around his table fellowship. On the two occasions in Luke's gospel that Jesus accepts invitations from Pharisees (7: 36-50 and 14: 1-14), Luke deliberately contrasts their aloofness and concern with honoured seats and important guests with Jesus' attitude of welcome and acceptance, especially to those who were marginalised, outside and 'other'. The proclamation of the Lord's death, so central to bread and wine, is a death for the other, the marginalised, as exemplified in Jesus' own table-fellowship, and suggests that a radical invitation in our own celebration of Communion might best proclaim the life and death of Jesus.

Other gospel narratives, principally the feeding of the 5,000 and 4,000; the post-resurrection meal with the two disciples at Emmaus (Luke 24) and the post-resurrection breakfast on the beach (John 21), move beyond this to make connections to the practice of Communion. While there is some scholarly division on the Eucharistic significance of these meals – the deliberate actions of Jesus in taking, blessing, breaking and sharing the bread reflect the same actions at the Last Supper, but they are also the familiar and everyday action of any meal – the pressing question is whether the gospel writers intend us to make that kind of connection. Although Jesus' actions were certainly commonplace, in the gospel accounts the repeated pattern of language in the feeding stories and the Last Supper suggest that such an intention is likely, and in John 6 much more certain. In John's gospel there is no account of the Last Supper meal, but the feeding of the 5,000 is followed by an extended discourse in which Jesus speaks about his disciples eating his body and drinking his blood. If John 6 fulfils the function of the institution of the Lord's Supper, then the context of the crowd is quite different to that of the upper room, suggesting that the invitation to the table is open and welcoming. The bread is offered to all on the basis of sheer grace.

Finally, the Synoptic gospels all record the sharing of a meal with his disciples before he died, at which the Lord's Supper is instituted. Although there are questions about the exact timing of Jesus' death, the Synoptic gospels clearly present this as the Passover meal, with all the theological resonances of redemption and liberation. Although it is commonly depicted with thirteen people around the table, most famously by Da Vinci, it need not have been restricted to that group. Jesus came with the twelve and they took their places (Mark 14: 17-18) at a house belonging to someone else – they were the guests. Here was a traditional meal, all-age inclusive, and in which the youngest person had a key role. We might also notice how these gospel writers all frame the sharing of bread and wine in some way with the betrayal and denial of Jesus, as Paul's description in 1 Corinthians 11. This seems to do more than offer a historical context, but provides its own theological interpretation. Jesus quite deliberately shares this last supper, at which he encourages his friends to continue to celebrate his transforming presence in bread and wine, with those he knows will betray and deny him; they are included to the last. The practice of Jesus seems radically shaped by the offer of grace.

The teaching of Jesus

One of the vivid descriptions of the kingdom of God Jesus employs is a great banquet, which draws on the eschatological symbolism of Isaiah 25. In both Matthew and Luke, the parable deals with issues of judgment and grace, although with perhaps a greater emphasis on judgement in Matthew and grace in Luke, but also more specifically with who is in and who is out. In Luke 14: 7-24, the parable works at two clear levels. It is firstly about the here-and-now and challenges: the host more concerned about his own elevated social status than those on the margins. The master would need to 'compel' the poor and lame to come in because it was so radical and unthinkable a possibility in that social structure. It is about table fellowship and the company we keep, and who we include or exclude.

But it is also about the future. In chapter 13 Jesus speaks about those coming from all corners of the world to eat in the Kingdom (in an echo of Isaiah 25 where all the nations are welcomed at God's mountain) before referring to his impending death and resurrection. The eschatological feast based on Jesus' death and resurrection then sets the immediate context for the discussion about dinner parties and banquets in the next chapter. Within the Old Testament we see some tension between the inclusive vision of Isaiah and other more inward looking attitudes, a tension found again in Jesus' disputes with some of the religious authorities. Here in Luke 14 the parable of the great banquet challenges us to think more deeply and widely about the nature of grace, both the graciousness of God who invites all to the messianic banquet and the call to such gracious living in the here and now.

> *"CAN COMMUNION BE PART OF OUR PROCLAMATION OF GRACE?"*

Theological and practical implications

In the light of these brief reflections we need to think further about a number of theological and practical issues.

- What is the relationship between Communion and grace?
- What is the relationship between Communion and baptism? The long-standing practice has been to think of baptism as the sacrament of initiation and Communion as one of continuation. But must it be this way? An emphasis on Communion as the offer of grace can offer a coherent theological position in which participation in Communion may both lead to baptism as well as flow from it.
- What is the relationship between Communion and the Church?
- What is the relationship between Communion and mission? Is Communion reserved for those committed and baptised, as became the practice in the second and third centuries, or can it be part of our proclamation of grace?

For me, I have come to a position where I have wanted to rethink the nature of Communion and to argue that it should be a place of radical welcome and inclusion. Not on the cultural basis of avoiding causing offence, but on the biblical and theological basis of the prevenient grace of God who offers his love in Christ which then seeks our response. For us as a family then, we have wanted our children to grow up around the table that it might lead to baptism, membership and their own engagement with mission.

Timothy George
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A DISTINCTIVE BAPTIST THEOLOGY OF PRESENCE

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS AT THE POINT OF COMMUNION?

The imonk.com website asked eminent American Baptist thinker Timothy George this question: "How can Baptists respond to Catholic and Orthodox Christians who challenge our view of the Lord's Supper as having no deeper historical/biblical roots than Zwingli?" Dr George responded thus:

Among many Baptist Christians there is a growing awareness that the Supper of the Lord should have a more prominent (and frequent) place in the life of worship, as it certainly did in the Early Church. There is also the realisation that a more robust doctrine of (what Calvin called) the real spiritual presence of Christ in the Supper is called for by the participationist language of the New Testament itself and is in keeping with the best traditions of Baptist life. No less a figure than Charles Haddon Spurgeon portrayed the Lord's Supper as nothing less than an encounter with the living Christ himself: "At all times when you come to the Communion table, count it to have been no ordinance of grace to you unless you have gone right through the veil into Christ's own arms, or at least have touched his garment, feeling that the first object, the life and soul of the means of grace, is to touch Jesus Christ himself."

For most of our history, Baptists have been more concerned with the externals of the Table: grape juice or real wine, who may preside, who may partake, rather than with the question of what actually goes on at this sacred meal. It is well known that Luther and Zwingli differed strongly, and actually broke fellowship with one another, over the meaning of the words of institution, "This is my body." Historically, Baptists have belonged more to the Reformed (whether Zwinglian or Calvinist) side of that debate, but it is important to realise that all of the mainline reformers reacted against the displacement of the Lord's Supper as the central focus of Christian worship in medieval Catholicism. They criticised the fact that the Eucharist had become clericalised (the service in Latin and only bread for the laity), commercialised (votive masses used as a fundraising scheme in much of the Church), and scholasticised (the dogma of transubstantiation and the view of the mass as a sacrifice).

> *"SINCE THE 16TH CENTURY, MANY OF THE CHANGES CALLED FOR BY THE REFORMERS HAVE BEEN ACCEPTED IN THE PRACTICE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH"*

The reformers harked back to the teaching of the New Testament, the practice of the Early Church, and especially to the theology of St Augustine. Augustine argued that in the sacrament the sign must be identified as a sign by a word spoken about it, thus making the sacrament itself a "visible word". In commenting on John 6: 50, Augustine wrote: "'He who eats of this bread will not die.' But that means the one who eats what belongs to the power of the sacrament, not simply to the visible sacrament; the one who eats inwardly, not merely outwardly; the one who eats the sacrament in the heart not just the one who crushes it with his teeth," [in 26.12 of Augustine's Tractate on the Gospel of John]. While Luther could speak of the manducatio impiorum, "the eating of the ungodly", the Reformed tradition picked up Augustine's distinction and emphasised the cruciality of faith for the proper reception of the beneficium of grace in the Supper. This same theology they found echoed in other pre-Reformation figures including Ratramnus, Wycliffe and Hus. What they rejected, in keeping with Luther, was an understanding of the sacrifice of the mass as an expression of works-righteousness, a theology which seemed to them to undermine the all-sufficiency of Jesus' once-and-for-all death on the cross – where, as Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer put it, he offered "a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world".

Since the 16th century, and especially in the liturgical renewal stemming from Vatican II, many of the changes called for by the reformers have been accepted in the practice of the Catholic Church. Yet important, church-dividing differences still remain and I think the Church of Rome is right to resist the kind of easy-going ecumenism that would ignore such differences in order to achieve a false unity. In our discussions with our Catholic brothers and sisters, we Baptists and evangelicals must learn to distinguish the unity we are called to affirm and the divisions we must still sustain. But this we should do in the spirit of Jesus' high priestly prayer for his disciples in John 17: "that they may be one, Father, as you and I are one so that the world may believe."

Our thanks to Timothy George for allowing us to reprint this excerpt which appeared at ***bit.ly/1yQ7lEC****.*

John Colwell
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The Eucharist by Juan de Juanes 1600 © Public domain

'...WITH MINE ON THE TABLE'

EXCLUSION AND THE FAITHFUL

THE PRACTICE OF EXCLUDING CHRISTIANS FROM COMMUNION, CONSIDERED FROM A BRETHREN BACKGROUND

It's almost thirty years since I buried my uncle, my mother's brother. Having survived throat cancer, he had succumbed to a heart attack whilst on holiday. As a child I had idolised him for all the wrong reasons: he drove big, fast cars, lived in (what then seemed to me to be) large houses and enjoyed a lifestyle that rendered my puritan home deadly dull. In my late teens and twenties I would engage him in long discussions about faith and prayed that a flame might be rekindled in his heart. As far as I know it never was. In his late teens he could have been found preaching the gospel on Brighton beach, but he was barred from Communion in the Brethren Assembly where he had been baptised when he married his teenaged girlfriend and she was found already to be pregnant – exclusion was the penalty. Three and a half years in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp probably quenched any residual spark of faith.

I tell this story not to speculate on the eternal destiny of those who appear, for whatever reason, to have abandoned the faith they once professed, but to own my own prejudices when considering questions of inclusion and exclusion: the

story of my uncle's exclusion shaped the spiritual life of my family. None of us can read Scripture other than through the lens of our own history, relationships and prejudices. It's as well to confess such.

Barring from Communion, of course, is not a practice exclusive to Brethrenism: the minute books of many of our older Baptist churches are sprinkled with examples of temporary or permanent exclusion as the penalty for a variety of minor or major misdemeanours and excommunication, with its horrifically fatal consequences, was the shameful mark of the late Medieval Church and through the early years of Reformation.

Nor am I ignorant of the texts of Scripture enlisted to justify the practice: calls for separation from harlotry throughout the book of Revelation (though one suspects the harlotry here was spiritual rather than physical); a general call to be separate in 2 Corinthians 6: 14 to 7: 1; the particular call in 1 Corinthians to refrain from eating with any supposed believers who are "sexually immoral or greedy, idolaters or slanderers, drunkards or swindlers" (1 Corinthians 5: 11); and the handing over of one to Satan that immediately precedes the latter passage – though what such 'handing over' might involve and imply is less than clear to us now than our past practice might suggest, and have you noticed how we tend to make much of immorality, idolatry and drunkenness, and tend to overlook greed, slander, and swindling (especially when the latter involves the taxman)?

> **"JESUS KNOWINGLY, DELIBERATELY, AND OPENLY SAID TO JUDAS, 'THIS IS MY BODY GIVEN FOR YOU…'"**

> **"WE TEND TO MAKE MUCH OF IMMORALITY, IDOLATRY AND DRUNKENNESS, AND TEND TO OVERLOOK GREED, SLANDER AND SWINDLING"**

But surely the truly surprising feature of the Corinthian correspondence is that this is the sole explicit incidence of anyone in this church being 'handed over' in this way. Here was a church in a mess: there was division over personalities and possibly over doctrine; there was at least a questioning of the hope of final resurrection; there was dispute over participation in pagan cults (that would have been at the core of public life and commerce); there was significant personal criticism of Paul; there was drunkenness and over-indulgence when the church gathered for the Lord's Supper; there were even men in the church who were frequenting prostitutes – yet in none of these instances did Paul demand exclusion or prescribe any form of penalty whatsoever. Most remarkably, in the latter case, he explicitly refrains from 'un-Christing' these men: "Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute?" (6: 15). Our forebears may have expected the apostle to exclude most members of this church, but he excludes just one (and even this apparent exclusion depends on a contestable interpretation of 'handing over'). And passages such as these, which speak of separation or possibly exclusion, must surely be weighed against passages that call us to deal gently with anyone 'caught in a sin' (Galatians 6: 1).

The other passage most often cited in support of exclusion occurs in Matthew 18: 15-20 – a significant passage not least since it is one of only two instances of the word translated 'church' within the gospels. But how is the word 'sin' being used in this passage? Is the context an instance of something like immorality, greed or slander, or is the context rather that of personal offence and relationship breakdown? Is the injunction to treat such as "a pagan or a tax collector" significant of exclusion from the community or is it rather a personal injunction to the individual offended? And let's remember that these words are on the lips of the one who was dismissed as the friend of tax collectors and sinners.

And surely this is the most pertinent point: Jesus was continually offending the religiously respectable and self-important precisely by those with whom he chose to share table fellowship. He gladly attends Matthew's party. While dining in a Pharisee's house he allows a notoriously sinful woman to wash his feet. He invites himself for a meal with Zacchaeus. But perhaps most notably of all, he shares his last supper with his disciples knowing full well that one of them had betrayed him, another would deny him (despite his protests to the contrary), and that all (or at least nearly all) would forsake him. Each of the gospel writers emphasises that Jesus knew that Judas would betray him. Luke makes it clear that Judas was still present when Jesus broke the bread and shared the cup (Luke 22: 21) – that is to say, Jesus knowingly, deliberately, and openly said to Judas, "this is my body given for you...." And to compound the case, John tells us that Judas also was present when Jesus washed his disciples' feet: fully knowing the betrayal that was in the heart of Judas, Jesus offered him bread and wine with the assurance that this truly was for him and, at the end of supper, just before Judas went out into the night, Jesus knelt in front of him and washed his feet. And if Jesus so knowingly, deliberately, and openly includes Judas, who am I to exclude anyone at all?

Well, I'll tell you who I am. I am one (probably like you) who, unlike Peter, has denied Jesus far more than three times and who, unlike Judas, has betrayed him more than once for rather less than thirty pieces of silver. I am one (probably like you) whose most grievous sins have remained hidden but which remain real nonetheless. I am one (probably like you) who can only share bread and wine with a profound sense of shame, itself overwhelmed with thanksgiving for the gracious mercy that welcomes me when others, if they really know me, might shun me. Of course, I might be harbouring unresolved sin in my heart but, if I'm eating and drinking in a manner that is self-condemning, that's a matter for me and for God, it's not for another to judge.

So can we please finally renounce the habit of treating the New Testament (very selectively) as a book of rules whereby we exclude others and (conveniently but hypocritically) include ourselves? Can we please stop identifying with Simon the Pharisee and identify more thoroughly and consistently with Jesus?

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Children and the Lord's Supper

THE EMOTIVE ISSUE OF CHILDREN AND COMMUNION, BY THE MAN WHO LITERALLY WROTE THE BOOK ON IT

Communion in theory...

Conversations about children and the Lord's Supper often open up a number of views. For some it is a simple matter of inclusion and for others it is a matter of intellect. Underlying these different views is both a way of seeing the child and a vision of what gathering at the table means.

We bring to these conversations, not always explicitly, a theology of children and a theology of the Lord's Supper. In addition, what is often left out of conversations around children and Communion is baptism, largely because we no longer expect baptism to be necessary for a person to share in bread and wine. I suggest we must ask what is the relationship between the Lord's Supper and baptism, with regard to whoever is welcome at the table.

The view that this is a simple matter of inclusion reflects the fact that being inclusive has become a central value in our society, something most people can agree is a 'good'. We judge institutions on the basis of how inclusive they are. This is mirrored in lots of ways, as might be expected, in the Church, particularly for Baptists in the Baptist Union of Great Britain, being an inclusive community is one of the Five Core Values. Being inclusive is seen as good, and the alternative is considered negatively, a matter of fairness and equality. To exclude children from sharing in bread and wine is unfair, a form of discrimination. Theologically, the argument runs that Jesus welcomed children to come to him and Jesus' own table practice was radically inclusive, so who are we to fence the table from them? Children are part of God's kingdom and the breaking of bread is an act of grace offered to all.

> "The Lord's Supper, with its simplicity of words and its visible actions, might is very accessible to children"

This perhaps also reflects both the fact that children are now much more included in worship – their participation is something we take into consideration a lot more – and that the Lord's Supper, while still done in general only monthly in Baptist churches, is understood as a central part of worship. It is not an add-on and, as such, children are now more likely to be present when it is celebrated.

We might want to critically ask whether our desire to include children at the table also reflects the pressure to idolise children and treat them as mini-adults, where the boundaries of childhood get blurred. The language with children of 'no' or 'wait' becomes difficult to speak as children are pressured into making choices, especially by a market which views them as potential consumers. When everything revolves around children and keeping them happy, we are more likely to argue for their inclusion. The strength of this view is to acknowledge that the gospel is for all: God's welcome extends to everyone. The weakness is perhaps the danger that we lose a sense that the body and blood of Christ is for those who are his body, the fellowship of believers.

The view that inclusion in Communion is a matter of intellect speaks to a view that participation at the Lord's Supper requires a measure of understanding about what is happening. At its most extreme, children are viewed as not having the intellect to understand; they do not know what it means 'to do this in memory of me'. Theologically this stresses that the table is about our ability to respond: participation demands that we fully know what we are participating in. The table, in this understanding, must be fenced from those who cannot 'discern the body' or 'examine themselves' as to do so may mean they eat and drink unworthily, with the consequence of judgement. The

child is viewed as a 'blank slate' or an 'empty vessel' who has not yet been given the knowledge.

We might want to critically ask how much understanding is required, especially when the invitation to the table is expressed as something like to those 'who love Jesus' (which I do think is in danger of being a little meaningless itself – what do we mean by 'love' and who is this 'Jesus' that we are asking 'do you love'?) We might ask if any of us have enough understanding of the meaning of this Supper? Are not most of us in danger of not being able properly to 'discern the body'? The strength of this view is to emphasise that we should not want to trivialise the table, the weakness is to make participation a measure of intellect. "Which of you are wise?" asks Paul to the church in Corinth, and the disciples frequently didn't understand Jesus. We should also question the view of the child here, which largely sees them as passive and not as 'active learners'.

Of the many different things that happen in church, the Lord's Supper, with the simplicity of its words and its visible actions of taking, blessing, breaking and sharing, might be one of the things that is most accessible to children.

Elementary: a practical response

I am four years into being a minister of a local church. When I arrived we celebrated the Lord's Supper once a month at a morning service, and the children were almost always present. They did not receive bread and wine, but a practice had evolved where the children received a promise of Scripture on paper.

Over about a year, using the Baptist Union's book *Gathering around the Table*, as church members we explored our understanding of the Lord's Supper and the potential participation of children. The church ended up moving to celebrate the Lord's Supper twice a month in the morning, once as part of all-age worship, and once without the children, allowing the sacrament to take different forms. I was given permission to 'play' with the logistics of how we conducted the meal. In our all-age Communion, the liturgy around the table is more participatory and is written with all ages in mind. We have, for example, used questions and answers and the prayer of thanksgiving has been done with sign-language, so the meal has a teaching element to it.

During an all-age Communion, the congregation is invited to come forward to the table as a sign that as God comes to us, so we come to him. The church meeting decided that bread and wine would remain for those who are baptised, but we do no check. More recently, the children have begun to receive grapes and a biscuit as a sign of their journey towards baptism. I was unsure about this at first and there is a danger that it becomes just a means of helping parents when younger children are wanting bread, but it seems to work. We have also said that anyone intentionally on their way to baptism (that is, they are undergoing preparation) should be free if they wish to receive bread and wine.

READING

Books to assist in our thinking about the Eucharist.

PROMISE AND PRESENCE

John Colwell

An examination of sacramentalism for Protestants that engages with Catholic categories and centres its theology in God's engagement with creation being mediated through creation. Evangelical, ecumenical and illuminating.

'TO SUCH AS THESE': the Child in Baptist Thought

Andy Goodliff

Mission Catalyst contributor Andy Goodliff examines two possible positions regarding welcoming people to the table, with specific reference to Baptist life and the inclusion of children.

A FEAST FOR ALL? Rethinking Communion for the Contemporary Church

Anthony Clarke

An exhaustive study of Baptist practice of Communion, making reference to theological, biblical and historic ecclesiastical material in an argument for a more inclusive approach, this essential piece of reading on the subject is published in 2008's Baptist Sacramentalism 2, edited by Anthony Cross and Philip Thompson.

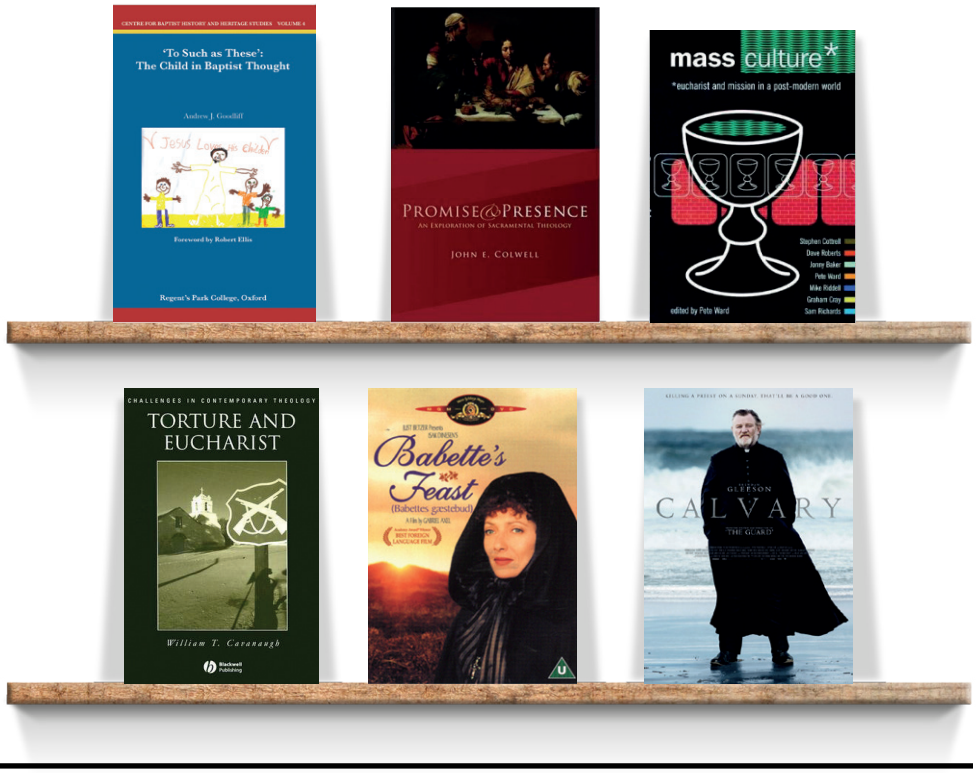
MASS CULTURE: Eucharist and Mission in a Post-modern World

Edited by Pete Ward

Another *Catalyst* contributor, Helen Dare, recommends this collection of essays published by Bible Reading Fellowship for its exploration of Communion on the margins of church as well as for committed Christians.

TORTURE AND EUCHARIST

William T Cavanaugh



Mostly focusing on the Church's response to torture, this book features a chapter on the Eucharist as a response to Capitalism. See also *Subversive Meals* by R Alan Streett.

BEING CHRISTIAN

Rowan Williams

The former ABC makes taking the Eucharist seriously and seeing it in the context of an attitude to creation easier to understand in this short, simple book with a much broader scope than just Communion.

TAKE THIS BREAD: a Radical Conversion

Sara Miles

This spiritual memoir and manifesto is the story of a woman who never expected Christ's welcome and, through her understanding and experience of Communion, offers it to others in challenging ways.

VIEWING

Films to aid meditation on the table.

BABETTE'S FEAST

A banquet that seats 12, sharing grace and restoring relationships, trinitarian analogues, quail and manna being served by a self-sacrificing figure... This 1987 film, based on a Karen Blixen novel, is much loved by religious and film academics, as well as Philip Yancey.

CALVARY

Critically fawned-over, this 2014 film focusing on a priest in a small Irish town may not be the most optimistic vision of humanity or the Church, but small glimpses of grace, light and faith abound. Characters receive Communion, a Priest receives a death threat.

ROMERO

The climactic scene of this ultra-Christian biopic of soon-to-be-beatified Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero examines themes of sacrifice and martyrdom in Communion. But the Lord's table in this true story of Christian activism and charity is often the scene of lessons in grace and truth.

THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST

Not everybody's cup of tea, certainly, but Mel Gibson's ultraviolent crucifixion pic is at pains to make connections between the meal we celebrate and the event it memorialises.

PLACES IN THE HEART

Robert 'Kramer vs Kramer' Benton directs Ed Harris, Sally Field, Danny Glover and John Malkovich in a film about small town America that concludes with a fantastic Communion, where the living and the dead, wives and mistresses, black workers and Klan members take part.

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