

An understanding of the Eucharist

ALEXA WALLACE

How do you receive the Eucharist? Now, I'm not asking about the physical mechanics of this – do you stand or kneel? a loaf of bread or individual wafers? red wine or white? – but more concerning how (if?) you believe you are “fed with Christ’s body and blood” through the Eucharistic meal. Is that nourishment through the physical elements? Or is it a gift that must be understood spiritually? This isn’t a new question – it has been discussed since nearly the dawn of Christianity. And, while these distinctions may seem pedantic, they have unwittingly become a key concern during the COVID-19 pandemic. When churches mandated suspension of the common cup and, in many cases, public worship, the understandings we hold of how we receive the Eucharist determines much of our way forward.

When I suggest that this question goes back millennia, and has carried forth over the course of time, I’m not exaggerating. Early traces of this are rooted in Augustine and Aquinas. Both concluded, albeit by varying methods, that though communion is ideally received by both the physical and spiritual reception, the core of the sacrament is in the latter. For Augustine, all communion is foremost spiritual communion, the elements merely aid in our reception.¹ For Aquinas, the emphasis is on the desire to receive the sacrament, not the act of communing itself.²

Going forward, however, I will limit the discussion to the Anglican context. I will focus on exploring the Book of Common Prayer and a pair of Anglican priests-theologians.

¹ See “Tractates on the Gospel of John (Augustine) - Tractate 26 (Jn 6:41-59),” *New Advent* (Kevin Knight), accessed April 21, 2020.

² See “Summa Theologiae: The Use or Receiving of This Sacrament in General (Tertia Pars, Q. 80),” *New Advent* (Kevin Knight, 2017) Article I.

Cranmer indirectly makes use of the concept of spiritual communion in the rubric at the end of the Ministry to the Sick in the first Book of Common Prayer. This text makes provision for those who are unable to receive the Eucharistic elements and is preserved, identically except for the modernization of spellings, in the most recent Canadian Book of Common Prayer. There it reads:

“But if a man, either by reason of extremity of sickness, or for want of warning in due time to the Curate, or by any other just impediment, do not receive the Sacrament of Christ’s Body and Blood: he shall be instructed that if he do truly repent him of his sins, and stedfastly believe that Jesus Christ hath suffered death upon the Cross for him, and shed his Blood for his redemption, earnestly remembering the benefits he hath thereby, and giving him hearty thanks therefor; he doth eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ profitably to his soul’s health, although he do not receive the Sacrament with his mouth.”³

While this was originally intended for those precluded from receiving by reason of illness, the Church with time has expanded its understanding. In 1916 the Bishop of Melanesia approved a rite for missionaries that allowed for spiritual communion when any of the following conditions were met:

1. In extreme sickness and consequent inability to communicate.
2. That a priest cannot be obtained.
3. The absence of any fellow-communicants and consequent inability to fulfil other Prayer Book rubrics.
4. Any other just cause.⁴

Even with this allowance still limited, it is among the minor evidence we have of this shift in understanding. That at least one province in the Anglican Communion created and authorized a rite that explicitly named this practice as spiritual communion and broadened its scope beyond solely the Ministry to the Sick.

Cranmer, Aquinas, and Augustine all made allowances for spiritual communion, but always with the understanding that there would be a priest physically present. One of the critical changes with the rite from Melanesia is the allowance that it occurs in the absence of a priest. As part of understanding this leap, and as we approach spiritual

³ The Book of Common Prayer 1962 Canada (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 2006), 584.

⁴ “A Form of Spiritual Communion, by Cecil John Wood (1916),” *Project Canterbury*, accessed April 21, 2020.

communion for our own concerns, we need to look back to the work of two modern Anglican priests.

F.D. Maurice and A.G. Herbert, both offered a change in perspective, taking the sacramentality of the church and extending it out into the world. In the nineteenth-century, Maurice suggests that the physical and divine exist without divide. This in turn allowed him the notion that God is in the material world and the material elements hold divinity. That there should be no separation between the two. Herbert continued along this vein in the twentieth century. For Herbert, the role of sacraments was to empower Christians to take their ministry out into the world, and to recognize that the entire world belongs to Christ.⁵

This might seem like a small, or a major, change depending on your sense of spirituality, but it represents a significant shift towards an allowance for dispersed spiritual communion. If all the world – not just our churches, but our homes, parks and communities – is sacred, why can't we experience our sacraments in our varied places?

Aquinas, Augustine, and Cranmer all posed possibilities for spiritual communion. Maurice and Herbert tendered the idea that all creation is sacred, and a place for the sacred. The Province of Melanesia brought these two concepts together to offer spiritual nourishment to their missionaries. This combination advances that spiritual communion is possible within our Anglican Church. But our understanding of our digital world and of our sense of digital community must still be pondered, and must be considered individually. Leaving the question of “should we” far from answered.

⁵ See James F White, “Sacramentality,” in *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 13-30.