**The Challenge of Eucharistic Discipline**

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If I voice a concern over increasing worries among conservative Episcopalians and Anglicans with respect to the sharing of the eucharist with liberal bishops and church members, it is not because I believe the worries themselves are irrelevant.  They are deeply pertinent, at a time when the very meaning and substance of the Christian faith has been assaulted and torn asunder within the body of our church, and when the godly demand to maintain clear commitments to the Gospel is being inevitably framed in terms of alternative congregational and episcopal subjections.  With whom are we “one”?  What does “oneness in Christ” mean anymore?

But I do have a concern that this worry over sharing the eucharist, however inescapable, should become the primary vessel of our ecclesial decisions over the Communion’s teaching and the authority of Scripture.  For it is a vessel too weak to carry such a weighty load;  the templates we erect ahead of time to determine the standards for communion will collapse, I fear, even before we sort out the proper bases for our common life.  At that point, the purpose of eucharistic discipline will slip from our hands, and once cast adrift perhaps sink altogether.

Much has been made of the early Church’s understanding of the eucharist as a sign and embodiment of union in the true faith; and therefore of the eucharist as the proper place where distancing from error be expressed, through the discipline of excommunication. Applied to the present moment, the precedents of past tradition, we are told, demand the faithful to withdraw from eucharistic fellowship with bishops who voted in favor of consent to Gene Robinson’s episcopal election and/or other related resolutions at General Convention, as well as to separate oneself from eucharistic fellowship with those who remain in communion with unfaithful bishops and their supporters.  The most prominent scholarly authority cited for this logic is Werner Elert, a German Lutheran theologian whose book *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, originally appearing in German in the 1950’s (in English in the 1960’s), was recently reissued in paperback.

It is worth taking a moment to consider the character of Elert’s outlook, not only in the context of his own concerns, but of the subject matter his work is meant to illuminate.  In the first place, Elert was a strong supporter of the Nazis.  This fact is not irrelevant to his later writing, though it is fair to point out that the connections can only be inferred.  In the midst of National Socialism’s rise  -- 1933--  he and other academic theologians defended, on the one hand, the theoretical purging of the German church of Jewish converts, and certainly from German positions of power, of Jews themselves.  Elert and Althaus, for instance, were the authors of the infamous “Erlangen Report” that defended, on purportedly theological grounds, the “Aryan clause” as applied to the church.   The issue at hand, in Elert’s eyes, was the propriety of maintaining the “German” *volkisch*character of Christianity in that nation, something he believed to be divinely authorized and morally demanded in the face of corrupting Jewish immorality, that had infected Germany like a contagion (Catholics were not far behind in their poisonous potential).

On the other hand, Elert was also articulate and vocal in publicly opposing the theological (and political) bases of the Confessional Church movement, supported by Barth and Niemöller.  He did so, in part, based on his commitment to a clear and overriding *Lutheran* confessionalism, that he believed to be subverted by the almost open-ended Scripturalism of people like Barth.  It was a view that led him explicitly to see Hitler as God’s servant to be obeyed, according to his own sense of Lutheran teaching on the “orders of creation”.  (Those interested in these matters, including the intellectual environment at Erlangen in which Elert was so active, can consult the book by James Stayer [*Martin Luther, German Saviour: German Evangelical Theological Faculties and the Interpretation of Luther, 1917-1933*]  and the broader picture of theology “under Hitler” by Robert Ericksen [*Theologians Under Hitler*].)  I realize that we need to be careful in singling out someone like Elert.  There were few heroes among German theologians of his generation;  and those who were (like Niemöller himself) almost all had dark sides to their Christian commitments (see Theodore Hamover’s work on German “resistance”).  This should alert all who see themselves in the role of upholders of truth and resisters of error.

Nonetheless, Elert’s concern with “purity” of race, of confession, and of ecclesial structures cannot simply be broken into disengaged parts, as if theological perception takes place in a realm unconnected to moral apprehension; these parts form a unity of motive in his thinking that was long-standing and consistent.  And while his book on eucharistic fellowship comes out of a particular confessional Lutheran context, it is difficult to believe that at least a major part of its informing interest is not entangled with the elements of his deeply-rooted concerns over integralist German Christianity.  I point this out with real concern:  in driving the present debate within Anglicanism so quickly, and on such bases as Elert’s arguments, to the matter of eucharistic fellowship, conservative Anglicans and Christians struggling with maintaining clear teaching over matters of sexual behavior and sexuality will both be misunderstood and themselves may be caught in currents that deform their own thinking and betray their own motives into less welcome hands.  We cannot avoid the responsibility of holding our theology accountable to the failures of past precedents, Elert’s dismally included.

Other scholars who have investigated the matter of eucharistic fellowship and discipline in the early church, while generally upholding the actual details of Elert’s scholarship – no one doubts the acuity of his historical research and grasp of the material --  have nonetheless reached far less pointed conclusions than he, and that is in part because of the different motives governing their research.  Kenneth Hein, for instance, a Catholic monk whose book on the*Eucharist and Excommunication* in the early Church was written under the supervision of Ratzinger himself (if in another era of the latter’s mood), points out that if one moves from the Eastern (Elert’s focus) to the Western church, the ambiguities of tying doctrinal division to eucharistic dis-fellowshipping become far more unsettled.  He discusses in this context Cyprian’s logical and pastoral difficulty in arguing for episcopally-oriented doctrinal purity, tied to eucharistic union, when bishops themselves (including his own relationship to Rome) stood opposed to each other.  The ambiguities come home to roost in the extended divisions of North Africa, which someone like Augustine eventually had to face and try, with much moral ambivalence, to sort out.

It was of course Augustine’s far more complex ecclesiology of the “mixed church”, of sacramental self-protection (as Anglicans have enshrined it in the 26th Article of Religion), of discretionary discipline, of engraced eucharistic unity, that was both bequeathed to the Western Church and that has thereby demanded of us less than rigid logics with respect to the relationship between doctrinal purity and communion.  The questions of eucharistic fellowship did not disappear for Augustine by any means; he himself seems to adopt less and more drastic postures in the face of Donatists and Pelagians, in turn and variously.  Sifting through his writings that relate to different phases of struggle and controversy, as well as pastoral particularities discussed within his letters – and they are so vast, multiplied, and scattered as to preclude useful citation in this kind of discussion --  proves a confusing task in terms of developing a clear platform upon which to describe faithful parameters for eucharist and discipline.  Certainly it is safe to say that Augustine and Elert are of extraordinarily divergent mindsets and spirits.

And this is the point Anglicans need to take care over:  the confusing and multiple precedents set for eucharistic discipline from the past continue to haunt efforts at church unity in the present, in ways that the confessionalism of, say, the Missouri Synod (highly receptive to Elert’s views) has difficulty addressing.  Ecclesial division for the Western Church has, in a self-conscious way far different than in the East, and both theologically and pastorally, clouded the matter of eucharistic discipline.  From the 3rd century, it has been obvious that rival jurisdictions, episcopal claims, denominational assertions, and doctrinal demands, represent *in themselves* an assault upon the integrity of the eucharist that simply does not allow either its instrumental or expressive clarity to be wielded easily.  The eucharist has always stood in judgment of us; not we of it.  When certain Taizé brothers and others decided that it was better not to receive the eucharist at all than to continue celebrating it within divided Christian communities (however much one community might see its own faith as better formed), this decision represented, albeit in an extreme practical posture, something that in various ways Western Christians have been troubled by for centuries – the “catholic” motive itself, as it hits upon the reefs of Christian personal choice.

I am certainly not downplaying both the Scriptural call to and the present need for “confessional” clarity with respect to the Gospel.  But I also firmly believe that there is no “grand principle” regarding eucharistic fellowship and discipline as they are tied to this call and need.   Such a connection is not even mentioned in the New Testament explicitly, where instead the problem of "discerning the body" by the communicant in the eucharist is the main challenge, not sharing it with the unworthy, doctrinally or morally  (the two are rarely distinguished in the New Testament).  There is, rather, a varied practice of eucharistic discipline, by no means unimportant or without the demand for discernment and decision, but applied in different ways at different times in different circumstances, and with very different evaluations.   Furthermore, its most rigorous sense of imposition came within the context of a "church universal" bound to a very unusual political order  (say, at the Council of Ephesus) that was trying to assert itself into the midst of an experience quite incongruent with its own ecclesial hope.

We simply are not there at present, in this world, and among our astoundingly multiplied Christian communities.  The idea that Anglicanism and ECUSA and anybody else should somehow evoke the world of Constantinian ordering, with all of its councils and proclamations and synods sifting the orthodox and heretical (often unsuccessfully), is living out a historical anachronism at best.  We might as well, as others have pointed out, use as our model the incessant round of Anabaptist "dis-fellowshipping" that marks a not particularly happy model within the Christian family.  But Constantinople and the Mennonites are equally distant from our own situation, whatever it may be we have to learn from them (and there is much in both cases).

The question of breaking eucharistic fellowship falls, after all, within the realm of discipline.  Discipline falls within the realm of common life and authority within the church.  However, common life and authority for the church are not clear-cut elements in an already divided church.   The views on discipline of a person like Cyprian are hard to transpose precisely because the character of church integrity as an institution is even less translucent now than in his era, and as he himself was forced to confront, there were profound obscurities that enveloped even his own behavior and choices.

What we are struggling to figure out, in this mixed-up world of Christian sects and denominations and world-wide "communions" and the rest is what such common life and authority -- yes, within a faithful belief in and service and following of Jesus the Christ!  -- might be.  But I am not certain that, in the first place, the essential question in this matter is who I am going to share the eucharist with.  It has probably already been answered *de facto*by each person already, and in ways that do not actually meet a purely evangelical test. (God save us from our own hearts, especially when they are clothed or masked in the logic of principle!)  And although many today would like a set of rules, and may well have them without anybody else’s help, such rules are simply not available to us in a clear way.  We may believe, and believe correctly, that there are truths of Gospel over which we cannot compromise.  But the imposition of discipline within the common body of Christ on the basis of such beliefs cannot possibly be part of these convictions, since they depend, not on our consciences, but upon the counsel of the church herself, now weakened and difficult to identify.

One of the main theological challenges in tying eucharistic discipline to doctrinal conviction is that the church does not -- traditionally -- believe in the contagion theory of the (poisoned) Eucharist. (And I am not, in Elert’s wake, convinced it is worth reconstituting.)  It believes, rather, in the contagion theory of the personal heart and conscience:  we are infected by our *own* sin, not by another's through proxy.  It is when our consciences are wounded and our habits are perverted by the example of the sins of others that we need to think of distancing ourselves from communion with them, or disciplining them (if we have the authority to do so as a body) by asking them to distance themselves.  We do so for the sake of their own souls and for the sake of the souls of others.

In this sense, discipline actually *presupposes* communion as a beginning and as an end – a point that I hope the Lambeth Commission will grasp and grasp with clarity and decisiveness : communion is preserved and strengthened through discipline, not undermined.  The two are neither contradictory, nor should they be placed in positions of mutual exclusion, as if “excommunication” is exactly what eucharistic discipline is all about.  Rather, ecclesial discipline of any kind is about restoration in the truth and reconciliation in Christ.   Without a framework of discipline that is clearly defined by the goals and means of such charitable hope, the present crisis may well turn into a frenzy of scrupulous disassociations and disorganized and conflicted interventions.  This is not a prediction:  it is a historical description.  Let us be forewarned!

We ought well to wonder, in the midst of a world (and a church) devoid of charity almost by definition, given what we have done to “communion” itself , if there *is*an authority that can help us through the thicket here.  Which bishops and councils, after all, shall we trust?  Whose “spirit”?   Surely this is what we are trying to perceive at this point, however murkily -- via Commissions, Networks, counsel, realignment, redirection, resistance, prayer and more prayer.   I myself am hopefully awaiting some such direction.  Nor do I believe that God will withhold it, although His time is less constricted than my own wishes.  Within this moment, dilated or not, we will all have to make our own decisions about those with whom we can share communion.

The question of my sharing the Eucharist with this or that bishop or set of clergy or others is one I must, of course, pose to myself.  Matters of doctrine and discipline as I understand them will inform my answer.  But they will not be decisive in themselves, nor can they be, because the context of their answer when it comes to the Eucharist is far broader than my own sense of truth and error, or even of this or that group’s.  I am part of the Body of Christ, the only standard, yet whose contours are known to me only through others and with others, and even then with a sense of humble openness.  Who can tell me whom I offend, or if even I offend my own conscience?  The Eucharist – Christ’s body given and shared – is not, in any case, itself scandalized by my own uncertainties and missteps in this matter.

In the end, I share communion first with Jesus Himself, and through Him with the His gathered Body.  That body, of course, is in a mess.  And if my vocation is to start sorting through the carnage and dismemberments, then I will need help that goes beyond the logics of ecclesial identities, confessionally described or not -- the wheat and tares are simply more obvious in their distinction to me than to others, perhaps.  (Though I feel I am in good company with my doubts here, along with Augustine among others.)  And so I can only pray, "Jesus help me", help me, that is, receive Him with those who are bound to Him.  I am trusting in the answer to this prayer.   Shall we judge each other in this trust?  Although we must each make choices about such communion and with whom, these are indeed matters at present, in the midst of division, that must remain hidden in the private conscience, and noted by others only as a passing shadow.   At this point, these choices can only be mine alone --  and God forgive me, perhaps, for making them at all.