The Lord's Supper in the Prayer Book and the Articles: who is doing what to whom?

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A Reformed Calvinistic doctrine of the Lord's Supper is compatible with the official doctrine of the Church of England. Despite very significant liturgical reforms, principally today Common Worship, and numerous reports and studies, the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion and The Book of Common Prayer[1] continue to provide uniquely authoritative doctrinal standards for the Church of England under the Word of God. Thus, for example, the Canons of the Church of England, it's laws, state:

> A 2 Of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion
>
> The Thirty-nine Articles are agreeable to the Word of God and may be assented unto with a good conscience by all members of the Church of England.
>
> A 3 Of The Book of Common Prayer
>
> 1. The doctrine contained in The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church according to the Use of the Church of England is agreeable to the Word of God.
>
> 2. The form of God's worship contained in the said Book, forasmuch as it is not repugnant to the Word of God, may be used by all members of the Church of England with a good conscience.
>
> A 5 Of the doctrine of the Church of England
>
> The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures.
>
> In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal.

Similarly, every ordained minister makes the following declaration of assent:

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[1] Hereafter these are referred to as The Thirty-Nine Articles or The Articles and The BCP or The Prayer Book without any difference of meaning.

> I, *A B*, do so affirm, and accordingly declare my belief in the faith which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness; and in public prayer and administration of the sacraments, I will use only the forms of service which are authorized or allowed by Canon.

The Preface to the declaration defines the historic formularies as "the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons".

As the Preface to Common Worship itself says:

> The forms of worship authorized in the Church of England express our faith and help to create our identity…. The Book of Common Prayer remains the permanently authorized provision for public worship in the Church of England, whereas newer liturgies are authorized until further resolutions of the General Synod.[2]

Even if it might not be the most commonly used form of service, The Book of Common Prayer also provides, at least in theory, a kind of default to which the minister should revert if there is a dispute about which order of service is to be used.

The Church of England is thus unusual in stressing the liturgical definition of doctrine.

The Reformation Theology of the Lord's Supper

Diarmaid MacCulloch's authoritative account of the English Reformation suggests that the Lord's Supper in The Book of Common Prayer and The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion is at the heart of Reformation theology, not least because the Reformation can be seen as issuing from a crisis of assurance. The priestly sacrifice of the Mass had been a meritorious propitiatory work offered to God on which people depended without confidence to lessen the purgatorial pains of themselves and their dead loved-ones[3]. The authors of The Prayer Book and The Articles came to see that justification is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Their theology of the Lord's Supper expresses this since it is as believers trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and feed on him in their hearts by faith with thanksgiving that they are assured that they are put right with God and will be welcomed as his friends to the King's Table at the Heavenly Feast.

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[2] Common Worship (ix)

[3] For popular pre-Reformation and later views of the Mass see Eamon Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580 (Yale, Yale University Press, 1992), esp. chapter 3. For the official reassertion of Roman Catholic dogma against Reformed views see The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent.

This thesis principally seeks to interpret the texts of The BCP and The Articles according to the original intended meaning of the authors in their historical context[4]. Some attention will also be given to the thorny question of what (other) readings of their words might be "legitimate"[5].

Roger Beckwith notes that "the Prayer Book is a product of the English Reformation, and its main author, Thomas Cranmer, was the guiding figure in the English Reformation. The Prayer Book took more than a hundred years to reach the 1662 form with which we are familiar, but it was still recognisably the same book that had left Cranmer's hands all that time earlier."[6] Beckwith adds: "the Thirty-nine Articles… were largely drafted by the same Thomas Cranmer who drafted the Prayer Book itself. They are his fullest expression of the doctrine which underlay his liturgy."[7]

This section examines the theology of The Prayer Book and The Articles to see who is thought to be doing what to whom in the Lord's Supper.

Who?

God

The Book of Common Prayer and The Thirty-Nine Articles, following Calvin, Luther and others, recapture and emphasise that the Lord's Supper is primarily God's action towards his people not their action towards God. Thus, God feeds "us with the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood" of Jesus "and dost assure us thereby of… [his] favour and goodness towards us."[8]

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[4] The Royal Declaration attached to the Articles commands that: "no man… shall… draw the Article aside any way, but shall submit to it in the plain and full meaning… in the literal and grammatical sense… [and] shall [not] affix any new sense to any Article.", BCP, p610.

[5] Broadly speaking, the meaning of a text may be said to arise from the author, the text and / or the recipient. It is not possible to treat the methodological, literary, historical, liturgical and ethical issues raised by these approaches here. Some directions might be suggested by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Is There A Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the reader and the morality of literary knowledge (Leicester, Apollos, 1998).

[6] Roger T. Beckwith, 'The Doctrinal Approach of the Reformers' Faith & Worship Numbers 65-66 Easter 2010 p16. See Roger T. Beckwith, and T. W. Drury, How We Got Our Prayer Book Latimer Studies 22 (Oxford, 1986). Peter Brooks, Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of the Eucharist (London, 1965), which argues that Cranmer's view of the Supper was akin to Calvin's.

[7] Beckwith, Doctrinal Approach, p17. For Cranmer's doctrine of the Supper, see also his 'A Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ'. For a studies of Cranmer's doctrine of the Lord's Supper see D. A. Scales, 'Thomas Cranmer's 'True and Catholick Doctrine of the Sacrament'' Churchman 104/2 1990, Colin Buchanan, 'What Did Cranmer Think He Was Doing?' Grove Liturgical Study No. 7 (Nottingham, Grove Books, 1976 Second Edition 1982) and Peter Brooks, Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of the Eucharist (London, 1965), which argue that Cranmer's view of the Supper was akin to Calvin's.

[8] BCP, Holy Communion, prayer after Communion, p258.

People & Presbyter

Yet people and priest are involved in the service and not merely passive. The English word priest is, in fact, properly the equivalent of presbyter or elder and does not suggest a sacrificial priest as in the Bible or in Roman Catholic theology[9]. The great change in The Prayer Book is that the Lord's Supper is not something the priest does which the people perhaps watch and hear in part. The very fact that the service is required to be in the language "understood of the people"[10] and that The BCP directs people to come up for Communion much earlier[11] and sets up the architecture and drama of the liturgy so that people can see what is going on, demonstrates that the people are now included in a new way.

The Prayer Book rubric directs that the priest should be at the north side of the Communion table to conduct the service[12]. Extraordinarily, the Church of England is the only church to practice North Side Communion and no contemporary explanation of this unique custom survives. Leading evangelicals Alec Motyer, Alan Stibbs and John Stott attempted a theological defence[13]. They regard it, among other things, as a discreet self-effacement on the part of the minister. It portrays Christ as the High Priest at his own table with the minister as a servant and a grateful recipient alongside the congregation, a representative of the priesthood of all believers. However, historically, visibility seems to be the purpose of north side communion. MacCulloch explains:

> Motyer and co. have clearly misunderstood what happened at the Reformation. The English reformers wanted to move their communion table away from the site of the altar, so they were faced with the problem of where to put it. One place would be at the top of the nave, and that seems to have been one common experimental place in Edward VI's reign, but particularly in Elizabeth's reign they seem to have decided to use the chancel, mostly because Elizabeth didn't want chancel (rood) screens demolished, and so you had to do something with the separate chancel space beyond the screen. They had the long narrow chancels of English medieval parish churches with a lot of space in the middle, so the obvious solution was to put the table there, but naturally it was best placed on the long axis of the chancel. So where to stand then? On the north side, obviously, for maximum visibility of the manual actions, with the sunlight pouring in from south or east, so that there could be no counterfeiting popish trumpery. This position then got frozen once the altarwise position of the table became the norm again, and became a shibboleth in

[9] See, for example, Christopher Cocksworth and Rosalind Brown, Being A Priest Today: Exploring priestly identity (Norwich, Canterbury Press, 2002), chapter 1 and R. T. Beckwith, Elders in Every City: The Origin and Role of the Ordained Ministry (Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 2003), chapter 2 for the authentic historical understanding that Anglican "priests" are presbyters / elders.

[10] According to Article 24: "It is a thing plainly repugnant to the Word of God, and the custom of the Primitive Church, to have publick Prayer in the Church, or to minister the Sacraments in a tongue not understood of the people.", BCP, p621. This fits with a Reformed emphasis on receiving the Lord's Supper with faith and understanding.

[11] "Draw near with faith" before the general Confession, BCP, Holy Communion, p251.

[12] BCP, Holy Communion, introductory rubric, p237

[13] In Motyer, Stibbs and Stott, Why I Value the North Side Position, CPAS Fellowship Paper 238 (1963)

evangelical circles in the nineteenth century in reaction to Anglo-Catholic realignments. It's as simple as that.[14]

According to the Prayer Book, there are to be no private masses or even semi-private public masses[15] where priest mumble the hocus-pocus[16], a parody of the virtually magical words of consecration, *hoc est corpus meum*, 'this is my body' (Matthew 26:26)[17]. As Article 30 requires, communion in both kinds, which had been denied to the laity since the thirteenth century as it was thought they could not be trusted with the blood of Christ[18], was restored to the people, thus suggesting a different non-material theological understanding of the eucharistic presence.

The people, then, participate in the Lord's Supper to a striking new degree with the introduction of the Reformation services.

Article 23 "Of Ministering in the Congregation" instructs that only those lawfully called to minister the Sacrament should do so[19]. Though the reasons are not spelled out in detail, it seems likely that this is because ministering the sacrament is related both to the ministry of the Word and to church government and discipline. This coheres with the instruction for the Curate to read out any excommunications in the Communion service[20].

Does what?

The Lord's Supper not the Sacrifice of the Mass

With the Reformation, the Supper has become again a meal at a "table" not a propitiatory sacrifice at an altar. The meal is "the banquet of that most heavenly food"[21] where the believers feed on Christ in their hearts by faith to our comfort and growth in grace.

[14] Personal communication by email 18/4/05.
[15] The notes at the end of the BCP Lord's Supper say: "And there shall be no Celebration of the Lord's Supper, except there be a convenient number to communicate with the Priest, according to his discretion." At the least three people should communicate with the Priest, p261.
[16] "Hocus pocus" in Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable Millennium Edition revised by Adrian Room (London, Cassell & Co, 1959-2001) p577. For magical associations with the Mass see Keith Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic: studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England (London, Penguin, 1971) esp. pp36-40, 60f, 303, 319, 326.
[17] See Alistair McGrath, Reformation Thought: An Introduction second edition 1993 (Oxford, Blackwell, 1988), p169.
[18] See McGrath, Reformation Thought, p167.
[19] BCP, Articles, p620
[20] BCP, "notices"! etc. after the creed, p241.
[21] BCP, Holy Communion, Exhortation (2) … in case the people [be] negligent to come to the holy Communion, p247ff.

The BCP Prayer of Consecration[22] and The Articles clearly reject the view that the sacrament is a propitiatory sacrifice or in any way deals with sin in similar terms:

The Offering of Christ once made is that perfect redemption, propitiation, and satisfaction, for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual; and there is no other satisfaction for sin, but that alone. Wherefore the sacrifices of Masses, in which it was commonly said, that the Priest did offer Christ for the quick and the dead, to have remission of pain or guilt, were blasphemous fables, and dangerous deceits.[23]

In fact, further, Gregory Dix called the Prayer Book Communion service "the only effective attempt ever made to give liturgical expression to the doctrine of justification by faith alone."[24]

The Presence of Christ

Above all, God offers believers the true and spiritual presence of the whole Christ in the Supper to be received by faith. Cranmer's service and doctrinal basis reject the idea of the corporeal presence of Christ in the elements (by trans- or con-substantiation), at one extreme, and mere memorialism at the other. Believers genuinely spiritually receive the whole Christ by faith.

The BCP rubric clearly states that by kneeling:

> no Adoration is intended, or ought to be done, either unto the Sacramental Bread or Wine there bodily received, or unto any Corporal Presence of Christ's natural Flesh and Blood. For the Sacramental Bread and Wine remain still in their very natural substances, and therefore may not be adored; (for that were Idolatry, to be abhorred of all faithful Christians;) and the natural Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ are in Heaven, and not here; it being against the truth of Christ's natural Body to be at one time in more places than one.[25]

This is a rejection of the Lutheran doctrine of the physical ubiquity of Christ's glorified humanity. The BCP is closer to Calvin's view that believers spiritually feed on Christ in heaven. The Articles likewise reject views of the corporeal presence of Christ in the sacrament:

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[22] BCP, Holy Communion, Prayer of Consecration, "Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption; who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world…", p255.
[23] BCP, Articles, p624.
[24] Gregory Dix, The Shape of the Liturgy (1945), p672
[25] BCP, Holy Communion, p262.

> Transubstantiation (or the change of the substance of Bread and Wine) in the Supper of the Lord, cannot be proved by holy Writ; but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a Sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions.

Devotion to the elements is banned: "The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was not by Christ's ordinance reserved, carried about, lifted up, or worshipped."[26] It would seem Jesuitical to suggest that this article intends only to point out that Jesus did not command such (allowable) practices: the clear implication is that they are being condemned.

Offer?

In the Communion service, the Priest begins the Offertory at the Table and the "Alms for the Poor, and other devotions of the people" are collected and those assisting "reverently bring it to the Priest, who shall humbly present and place it upon the holy Table. [And] … the Priest shall then place upon the table so much Bread and Wine as he shall think sufficient." Some have taken this to suggest that the unconsecrated bread and wine are being offered to God (to be set apart for a holy purpose). It would seem liturgically clumsy to place the bread and wine on the table with the offertory at this point if this notion is deliberately being avoided. In the prayer: "We humbly beseech thee most mercifully [*to accept our alms and oblations, and] to receive these our prayers, which we offer to thy Divine majesty;"[27] it is possible that the "oblations" (a term which is used twice of the death of Jesus in the Lord's Supper service) are, or include, the unconsecrated bread and wine. Beckwith and Drury think it more likely that the oblations are the other financial gifts of the people which are not alms for the poor, such as money given to support the ministry, but they conclude: "We need not, however, condemn those who include the bread and wine among the 'other devotions'."[28] As with Calvin's doctrine of the Supper, it is not necessary to think that all God-ward action is excluded, although it is carefully circumscribed and, if it is allowed, is most definitely a secondary and subordinate response to God's prior and primary action. It is important to underline the difference between offering the unconsecrated elements to God for his use and the Roman Catholic notion of offering the consecrated elements as a means of (re-)offering the sacrifice of Christ to the Father.

The communicants are to receive (rather than offer) the consecrated bread and the wine "with thanksgiving"[29] (Eucharist) and it is after the Communion that they ask the Father "mercifully to accept this our sacrifice of thanks and praise."[30] Again, as with Calvin, this is a non-propitiatory sacrifice. It might be debated whether or not the Supper itself, or the elements in it, are included at all in this sacrifice. The statement could refer only to the prayer which now expresses praise or to

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[26] BCP, AR 28, p623.
[27] BCP, Holy Communion, p244.
[28] Beckwith and Drury, How We Got Our Prayer Book, p47. Likewise, R. T. Beckwith, Praying With Understanding: explanations of the words and passages in the Book of Common Prayer Latimer Briefings 2 (Oxford, 1992): "Here the reference is to our own gifts, conceivably meaning the unconsecrated bread and wine, but more probably those parts of the collection [of money] which are not 'alms' (i.e. not for the poor).", p17.
[29] BCP, Holy Communion, words of administration, p256.
[30] BCP, Holy Communion, p257.

the whole service, or to something in between. If, properly considered, all of life is a sacrifice of thanks and praise to God (Romans 12:1), it would be bizarre to think that the Lord's Supper alone is excluded. Whether or not it is in any sense a special sacrifice of thanks and praise is another question. Perhaps it might be seen as a focal point for offering all of life to God in grateful thanks for all that has been received from him. The believer would be giving back to God what God has given. The Prayer Book and Articles do not decisively adjudicate on such questions.

The dead

MacCulloch eloquently describes the relationship between the Mass and / or Lord's Supper and the dead, which is so transformed by The BCP and Articles:

For the late medieval Church, the mass had become as much something for the dead as for the living…. Behind the crowds of the faithful in the medieval parish church… jostled invisible … crowds of the dead. … because the church maintained a model of the afterlife in which the mass could speed the souls of the faithful departed though purgatory. A gigantic consumer demand of the dead fuelled the services of the Church…. It was to change all this that the reformers struggled. Insisting that the just shall live by faith alone, they believed that the medieval Church, with the papacy as its evil genius, had played a gigantic confidence trick on the living by claiming to aid the dead in this way. They sought to banish the dead, and to banish the theology which had summoned them into the circle of the living faithful gathered around the Lord's table.[31]

However, this is not entirely accurate when applied to the 1662 BCP: the dead are not wholly banished. Beckwith and Drurry point out that the "thankful Commemoration of the Faithful Dead" without which "our Eucharist would hardly be complete"[32] was restored in 1662. This is appropriate to the Communion of the Saints and the doctrine of fellowship with the universal church down the centuries (living and dead) and around the world, but it must be emphasised that in the Reformed service believers pray for their final rest with (like) the dead, not that of the dead[33].

To whom?

For believers

[31] MacCulloch, Cranmer: A Life, op. cit., p614.
[32] Beckwith and Drurry, How We Got Our Prayer Book, p46
[33] Notice that we pray for "the whole state of Christ's Church militant here on earth", BCP, p244, though Beckwith, points out that "… printed Prayer-Books … prove that there was a desire on the part of some to omit the words 'militant here in earth' They are first erased and then restored in handwriting.", Praying, p46.

The Lord's Supper is only for those who "do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins" who "draw near with faith."[34]

Since the spiritual feeding in the Supper is by faith, in heaven, "The Wicked, and such as be void of a lively faith, although they do carnally and visibly press with their teeth (as Saint Augustine saith) the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, yet in no wise are they partakers of Christ: but rather, to their condemnation, do they eat and drink the sign or Sacrament of so great a thing."[35]

Conclusion

The abiding doctrinal standards of the Church of England, The Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-Nine Articles, whilst not reflecting Calvin's doctrine and practice exactly or in every detail are compatible with, indeed, expressive of and complimentary to a Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper, such as Calvin's. The understanding of the mode of Christ's presence in the Supper given in the Prayer Book and Articles is best described as Calvinistic.

[34] BCP, Holy Communion, p251.
[35] BCP, Article 29, p624