



‘We Will Take What You Offer’: Communion as Countercultural Act

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*We will take what you offer,
We will live by your word;
We will love one another
And be fed by you, Lord.¹*

A turning point in self-perception for the congregation of Cranhill Parish Church was an ‘away day’ in October 2007. At this day away together we shared what it is we value about our congregation and community. We explored together the parable of the yeast, by making and then sharing bread in Communion. Not only did this Communion speak to us of the potency of the ‘small’ when in God’s hands, but of the potency of the Eucharist itself. As the yeast transforms the dough, so Communion transforms the community ... and not once only, but every time we take the bread and drink the wine.

Again and again as we engage with Scripture we take succour from the fact that the small communities of faith we call the early church were beset with difficulties and challenges every bit as overwhelming as ours. And again and again we find that to remember our Lord as he commanded sustains us and directs us and gives us courage to go on.

The ‘now’ of faith contains both a realised and a future eschatology – woven together, in tension, looking to the future heaven, but also defiantly proclaiming ‘heaven starts now!’ and so seeking it, and proclaiming it, and finding it in daily life. Sharing Communion, therefore, is a profoundly countercultural act. In this short paper, let me try to expand what I mean, using the verse of the worship song from the Wild Goose Resource Group quoted above.



We will take what you offer ...

Often theology around the Last Supper or Communion focuses on the remembrance of Christ's death, as a place to 'taste and see' God's salvation through Jesus' death. Of course it is this. But it is also an enactment of resurrection as the broken bread is re/membered in the community of faith.

Traditionally, our statements of faith emphasise Jesus' birth and then move directly to his suffering and death. For the renewal of the Church we need to rediscover the life and teaching of Jesus as a radical non-violent champion of the poor: a social commentator, as well as a prophet, teacher, and healer.

Far from being about 'pie in the sky when you die', Communion teaches us not to wait for a future heaven, although that is promised, but to work for it now. An ideology of 'Kingdom theology' emphasises the 'already' over and against the 'not yet' of the expected fulfilment of God's reign. Just as the whole earth is full of God's glory, so ordinary life is the site of our discipleship. Communion is the acting out of the transformation that is life in Christ. As others have said, the Last Supper summarises the entire mission and life of Christ. In taking bread, giving thanks, breaking and sharing, he is speaking of his own sense of what his life and death means, and also modelling the life he wants for the followers of the Way.

In his book exploring the possibilities of 'religionless Christianity', teasingly hinted at in *Letters and Papers from Prison* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Drury writes that the centre of our religion is not a binding and holding to dogma or 'truth':

It will have to be a centre at which breaking and giving away is at least as permanently at work as joining and holding. There is an image of it in the central Christian rite of Holy Communion: the focal 'body' of Christ broken and given.²

The human impulse is to hold and to hoard. Breaking and giving away or sharing is profoundly countercultural.

Jesus stands firmly in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. In breaking and sharing bread, Jesus is challenging the human impulse to grab and hoard. It is a counterintuitive, countercultural action.

Further, Communion is often seen as an intensely spiritual experience for the individual. Our emphasis on taking it together and on the communion between and beyond us, however, is also countercultural. Communion is not only about ‘me and my Jesus’. Citizenship of God’s realm speaks of hospitality, generosity and transformation held as values over and against the values of an individualistic, consumer culture. The breaking and sharing of bread connects through time and across borders in a challenge to the impulse to ‘gate and police’ the boundaries of our communities. Bread and wine are staples of human survival as well as potent symbols of faith, and recognition of that challenges the dangerous dualism that separates sacred from secular, Sunday from Monday, orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

Taking what God offers is an act of solidarity with these countercultural values.



We will live by your word ...

The New Testament and especially the gospels are stuffed full of communion. Then, of course, there is the defining Hebrew story of deliverance from Egypt and daily desert food, and the ritual remembrance of Passover itself. As we follow the common lectionary we encounter these episodes and stories all the time. Each Communion service, once a month, can emphasise a different aspect: *hospitality; abundance; sustenance for the journey; Jesus’ presence in us, the body of Christ; invitation to lost and least; Word become flesh; nourishment; broken bread that we might be whole; hunger for justice; harvest; ecology; communion with saints* – the depths are unplumbed. Sharing a meal with thanksgiving expresses our sense of our fragility and our

dependency on what the earth provides, and our dependency on one another.

We also encounter Communion in other places. Jean, a member of our congregation, describes being profoundly moved by a Passover meal shared with friends from the neighbouring Roman Catholic church. But we also experience Communion not only in overt moments of worship, but in the soup and sandwiches we have together on other Sundays, and in the community café through the week. And we can look for it round every table at which we eat.



We will love one another ...

We know that the breaking of bread together was a very important part of the liturgy of the early church. It was probably weekly, and we know most about that practice because Paul had cause to write to the Corinthians, whose eucharistic practice reinforced rather than challenged the social inequalities of Roman society. For Paul, not only was Eucharist a commemoration feast, as was the practice in contemporary society, it was a transformative experience.³

Lily, another member of our congregation, once described her first Communion of seventy years ago and still so memorable, using the word ‘ritual’. She then corrected herself. Perhaps because ‘ritual’ has come to have additional nuances of hollowness or emptiness. In sociological terms, though, ‘ritual’ is the correct, much richer word. *Any* formalised behaviour is ritual. Ritual studies suggest a dialectical relationship between ritual and social structure. Some theorists see this as essentially conservative, a protecting of boundaries, but others, following Victor Turner, see ritual as a ‘form of protest against the existing social structure [which] contributes to social change.’⁴

Bobby Alexander takes this idea of protest further in his study of a black Pentecostal church in the United States, arguing that: ‘ritual is part of the process of social change, given its capacity to generate new, communitarian social arrangements.’⁵

Alexander's argument is that given an accompanying and overtly articulated ideology ritual action is in itself transformative. This seems to be what Paul is doing when he gives the Corinthian house church a rubric to accompany their Eucharist, a rubric which underscores the egalitarian nature of the meal. (Even if he does not go so far as to say the rich must share their food with the poor, it is a logical next step, and social reversal is so central to Jesus' own meal practices.)

And the central ideology expressed in Communion? Love. When we make this fact explicit, participation in the ritual of remembrance is a recommitment to community shaped by love of God and neighbour.

It can be argued that Communion is in this sense not so much pastoral as political:

We all think we go to get something from it, to feel better, to get a spiritual buzz, but I am unable to find that in any Scripture passage about Communion or in any of the fellowship meals Jesus ate with sinners and prostitutes and the rest. It was a political action of radical inclusion and defiance. Even the Last Supper wasn't about feeling better. It was an act of defiance *against* the dark powers and *for* the power and sacrifice of love. The only tingle comes from the daring that Jesus broke the bread and went to the cross trusting love, not expecting resurrection.⁶

So Communion is the continual living out of a story of changing and transforming the world, not with force but with breaking bread.



And be fed by you, Lord

In a recent episode of *EastEnders* after yet another awful traumatic incident, the Mitchell sisters suggest a family meal. Phil protests, 'I can't celebrate with you lot now!' He, along with many in our culture, can't envisage eating together as a source of comfort or hope, as a sign of solidarity or as an act of repentance and sign of forgiveness. Communion has all this richness to offer.

The last line of the worship song I've been using to shape my reflections runs 'And be fed by you, Lord.' It could also, equally, read 'And be led by you, Lord.' As disciples we want to follow Jesus. But for a small, struggling community of faith to be *fed* is somehow more potent. We know our reliance on God. There is a need to be reminded that God provides daily what we need. There is a need to be reminded that there is sustenance. Was it Bonaparte who said, 'An army marches on its stomach'? If we are to continue the struggle of the incarnation we need to take Jesus into our body as he takes us into his. And then we need to live out of that impulse of thankfulness and breaking and giving away. As Margaret, one of our members, put it so beautifully – when we do that, '*Something new happens: it is resurrection now.*'

- ¹ "We Will Take What You Offer" in John L. Bell, ed., *There Is One Among Us: Shorter Songs for Worship* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Resource Group, 1998).
- ² John Drury, *The Pot and the Knife* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 4 f.
- ³ Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1983), 162.
- ⁴ Bobby Alexander, *Victor Turner Revisited: Ritual as Social Change* (Atlanta, GA.: Scholars Press, 1991), 1.
- ⁵ Alexander, *Victor Turner Revisited*, 19.
- ⁶ Roddy Hamilton, "This elastic is going to snap," Friday 31 August 2007 <http://abbotsford.org.uk/>.