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# Lay Administration of the Lord's Supper: A Change to Stay the Same<sup>1</sup>

John Woodhouse

Evangelicals must be committed to practising what they preach. We cannot be content with practices which obscure or distort the gospel. This is why many Anglican Evangelicals today are urging the removal of the prohibition which restricts the administration of the Lord's Supper to ordained priests.

The prohibition has no basis in Scripture. Indeed it is remarkable that a role which is not even mentioned in the New Testament should have become so important in the minds of many. There are some who suggest that a change in this matter, on which Scripture is completely silent, is more radical than any of the changes in church belief and practice over the last 400 years. Article VI brings a truer perspective:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

The problem perceived by many Evangelicals is that the prohibition of lay persons from ever administering the Lord's Supper suggests to many in our churches (and to many outside our churches) that:

(a) there is something about an ordained priest that gives him/her the power to pray the prayer of consecration – a power which a lay person cannot have;

(b) higher qualifications are needed for the administration of the Lord's Supper than for preaching the Word of God – lay persons can often do the latter, but never the former;

(c) the validity of the Supper depends somehow on the person administering it – a priest (*any* priest) is needed to make the occasion authentic;

1 This paper is a revision and expansion of a speech given to the Synod of the Diocese of Sydney in October 1994 moving the second reading of a bill for an ordinance enabling lay persons and deacons to be authorized to administer the Lord's Supper. Readers will note that aspects of the original genre have not been entirely eliminated!

(d) ordination has more to do with the Sacrament than with preaching – a priest can share his preaching ministry with competent lay persons, but not his ministry of administering the Lord’s Supper; and

(e) a priest is *essential* to the conduct of the Lord’s Supper – though not essential for any other event in church life.

In each of these ways the practice of absolutely prohibiting a non-priest from administering the Lord’s Supper contradicts, or at the very least obscures, the gospel we preach.

## A Change to Stay the Same

There are times when you have to change in order to stay the same. In order to remain true to fundamental principles there are times when the forms which express those fundamentals must change. Forms which performed one function at one time and in one context must be open to change if that same function is not to be obscured and hampered at another time and in another context.

The *Book of Common Prayer* itself insists that forms should change ‘according to the various exigencies of times and occasions’:<sup>2</sup>

There was never any thing by the wit of man so well devised, or so sure established, which in continuance of time hath not been corrupted.<sup>3</sup>

The *Book of Common Prayer* recognizes that there are things that ‘at the first were of godly intent and purpose devised, and yet at length turned to vanity and superstition’.<sup>4</sup>

It is the contention of this paper that the absolute prohibition of any person who is not an ordained priest from administering the Lord’s Supper was ‘at the first of godly intent and purpose devised’, but ‘yet at length [has] turned to vanity and superstition’.

It is helpful to distinguish the prohibition itself (which I will call a ‘form’) from its effects (‘function’). The function of the prohibition today is very different from its function in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Consider the restrictions that surrounded public ministry in 1662. The *Book of Common Prayer* envisaged no lay ministry of the Word or the

2 From The Preface

3 From Concerning the Service of the Church

4 From Of Ceremonies: why some be abolished, and some retained

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Lord's Supper. However:

It appertaineth to the office of a Deacon ... to assist the Priest in Divine Service, and specially when he ministereth the holy Communion, and to help him in the distribution thereof, and to read holy Scriptures and Homilies in the Church ... and to preach if he be admitted thereto by the Bishop.<sup>5</sup>

It is not clear how extensive the involvement of the deacon in the Lord's Supper might have been. The rubrics of the Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper specifically indicate that it was to be the priest who said/read:

The Lord's Prayer

The Collect

The Ten Commandments

The Collect for the Queen

The Epistle

The Gospel

The Offertory Sentence(s)

The General Prayer for 'the whole state of Christ's Church militant here in earth'

The Exhortation (at the time of the celebration of the Communion). The call to repentance

The Absolution (said by the Bishop, if present)

The Comfortable Words

'It is meet, right, and our bounded duty ...'

The Prayer of Humble Access

The Prayer of Consecration

The Lord's Prayer

The Blessing (said by the Bishop, if present)

It is particularly interesting to note that the Prayer of Consecration is one of many items which, according to the rubrics, are to be said by the priest. The 1662 Act of Uniformity made it clear that only those who had been episcopally ordained priest may 'consecrate and administer the holy sacrament of the Lord's Supper'. However, it is now commonly accepted in many parts of the Anglican Communion that a person other than the priest (a deacon or an authorized lay person) may say/read several of the above items, but never the Prayer of Consecration. It is not clear why the rubric to that prayer has popularly been given more weight than the others. Restricting that prayer to the priest, except on the same grounds that virtually the whole liturgy is restricted to him, has no basis in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

5 From The Form and Manner of Making of Deacons

In 1662 the prohibition against non-priests from administering the Lord's Supper, expressed in the Act of Uniformity, was part and parcel of the restriction of all public ministry to the clergy. Only clergy had any part in the public ministry of the Word of God and the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. There is no concept in the *Book of Common Prayer* of a lay person ever taking any part in the public liturgy of the church. Those who appeal to 'Anglican Order' must be very clear that in 1662 'Anglican Order' excluded lay persons from any part in public ministry. Certainly they were excluded from preaching, but also from leading Morning or Evening Prayer, reading the Scriptures in church, and so on.

In 1662 there was a hedge around *all* public ministry of Word and Sacrament. It was a big hedge. And it would be appropriate to describe this as a form with a 'godly intent and purpose'. In a day of widespread illiteracy, limited theological understanding – certainly among the laity – and a recently reformed church, the purpose and function of this restriction was to guard the public ministry of the gospel from corruption. It was a kind of quality control.

It is important to understand that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the Church of England, the fact that only priests could administer the Lord's Supper was not based on the idea that only priests, by virtue of their episcopal ordination, had the power to administer the Supper. Even a casual reading of Thomas Cranmer on the Lord's Supper will dispel that idea. Neither was it some concept of the 'president of the community' who was the right person to 'preside' at the Lord's Supper. That is a novel idea in Anglicanism, and has never been the practice. It is not that the Rector (or equivalent) must do it. There has never been an objection to assistant priests, or visiting priests administering the Sacrament. The issue in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was quality control: only priests could do it, but not necessarily the Rector. And the same rule applied to *all* public ministry in church.

Canon 56 of the Canons of 1603 illustrates this last point. This canon envisages a minister who has 'cure and charge of souls', and who may 'chiefly attend to preaching', having 'a Curate under him to execute the other duties which are to be performed for him in the Church'. These duties included the administration of the Lord's Supper. The canon prescribes that such a minister must himself read the Divine Service and administer the Lord's Supper at least twice a year! On all other occasions 'the Curate under him' may perform this duty for him. There is no suggestion that the Lord's Supper should normally be administered by the minister 'that hath cure and charge of souls'.

Too much of the modern debate has departed too far from a reformed understanding of ministry and sacraments. Thomas Cranmer discussed the

distinction between priests and lay people in relation to the Lord's Supper in terms that are relevant to the present debate:

Therefore Christ made no such difference between the priest and the layman, that the priest should make oblation and sacrifice of Christ for the layman, and eat the Lord's Supper from him, all alone and distribute and apply it as him liketh. Christ made no such difference; but the difference that is between the priest and the layman in this matter is only in the ministration; that the priest, as a common minister (ie servant) of the Church, doth minister and distribute the Lord's Supper unto other, and other receive it at his hands... As in a prince's house the officers and ministers (ie servants) prepare the table, and yet other, as well as they, eat the meat and drank the drink; so do the priests and ministers prepare the Lord's Supper, read the Gospel, and rehearse Christ's words; but *all the people* say thereto, Amen; *all* remember Christ's death, *all* give thanks to God, *all* repent and offer themselves an oblation to Christ, *all* take him for their Lord and Saviour, and spiritually feed upon him; and in token thereof, they eat the bread and drank the wine in his mystical (ie symbolic) Supper.<sup>6</sup>

Cranmer went to great lengths to play down the significance of the role of the priest at the Supper, and to emphasize that all that matters as we eat and drink together in remembrance of Christ's death, we all do together. The priest, like a servant in a king's house, prepares the Supper, and serves both the Word and the symbol of the Word. It is clear that Cranmer not only never did, but he never would call the priest's role in the Lord's Supper 'presidency'!

However, for the purpose of guarding the public ministry of Word and sacrament, it was *all* restricted to the clergy: essentially to priests, with some assistance from deacons.

While that wide restriction in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can be regarded as 'of godly intent and purpose devised', that does not mean that it can or should be retained at the end of the twentieth century. Today we are blessed with many gifted and highly educated, theologically qualified lay people. While oversight of congregations is still rightly entrusted to fully trained and recognized ordained persons, competent lay persons now share in the public ministry of the Word, and of prayer, and indeed often play some public role in the ministry of the Lord's Supper (such as assisting in distribution, or leading some of the prayers). This

6 A Defence of the True and Catholick Doctrine of the Sacrament Book V chapter XI 'The difference between the priest and the layman'. Emphases added.

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development has been largely uncontroversial and beneficial to us all.

Therefore the form ('Anglican order' if you like) has already changed radically, for the very good reason that today to restrict all public ministry to the clergy only would be to rob the church of much quality ministry. To insist that this further change is objectionable, because it is 'contrary to Anglican order' fails to appreciate the enormous changes that have already (and properly) taken place.

However a remnant of the old general prohibition remains. One aspect of public ministry still has that hedge about it. The hedge made sense when it surrounded all public ministry and, so to speak, protected it from ignorant and incompetent lay persons. But the hedge makes no sense when it is left around only one aspect of public ministry, and protects it from highly competent and knowledgeable lay persons who share in church leadership in every other conceivable way under the oversight of the Rector.

Today the prohibition no longer serves its original function, and indeed works against the very theology which gave rise to it. It has, in the words of the *Book of Common Prayer*, 'at length turned to vanity and superstition'. Go back to the Reformation, and you will not find the ministry of the sacrament separated off from the ministry of the Word like this, as though a higher qualification is needed for administering the Lord's Supper than for preaching. Indeed, if anything, you will only find the reverse. Martin Luther wrote 'the man to whom has been committed the office of preaching has committed to him the highest office in the Christian Church. He may also baptise, say mass...'<sup>7</sup>

To remove the absolute prohibition that has become part of Anglican church life would be to express an understanding of both ministry and the sacraments that is closer to our Anglican formularies. This is one of those times when it is important to change in order to stay the same.

## Not 'Presidency'

Some confusion has come into the discussion of lay involvement with the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, by the use of the term 'presidency'. The word is unhelpful for a number of reasons.

Firstly, 'president' is not a term found in the New Testament or the *Book of Common Prayer*, and its first known relevant use (by Justin Martyr in

<sup>7</sup> 'The Right and Power of a Christian Congregation or Community to Judge all Teaching and to call, appoint, and dismiss Teachers, established and proved from Scripture' (1523) in *The works of Martin Luther* volume 4 (Philadelphia 1931) p 84

his *First Apology*) seems to be a reference to the regular head of the congregation in terms that would be understood by outsiders.<sup>8</sup> The *Book of Common Prayer* speaks of 'ministering' or 'administering' the Sacrament, a rather different concept.

Secondly, it has become usual to use the term 'president' to refer to the person who leads the people on a particular liturgical occasion (such as the Lord's Supper). The confusion arises because others (probably including Justin Martyr) refer to the 'president of the community', an ongoing role, not restricted to any particular occasion. The matter under consideration has been whether the only person who can 'preside' (in the former sense) is the 'president of the community'. Some have suggested that any 'presidency' exercised by a lay person will undermine the 'presidency' of the priest. This can be more clearly considered if different terms are used for the two concepts.

Thirdly, it is worth noting that even now a lay person can (and probably does occasionally) 'preside' (in an ordinary sense of the word) at the Lord's Supper quite legally, and without controversy. If, say, in the absence of the Rector, a lay person welcomes the congregation, and leads them in the first part of the liturgy (the 'Ante-Communion'), but invites a visiting priest to say the Prayer of Consecration, and to distribute the elements with the lay person's help, many would regard the lay person as the 'president' of that gathering on that occasion.

Fourthly, lay administration of the Lord's Supper should acknowledge the oversight that rightly belongs to the priest to whose 'cure and charge' the people have been committed. The Rector remains the 'president' of the congregation, but the particular service, at the 'president's' direction, is carried out by a lay person. Like all lay (and diaconal) ministry, this ministry would be 'assisting the priest'. The term 'presidency' for 'administration' tends to obscure this fact.

Fifthly, in the administration of the Lord's Supper the focus is not on the minister, but (as Cranmer emphasized) on the corporate act of remembering the Lord's death through the total activity of the thanksgiving, distributing and eating together. The term 'presidency' tends to give too much weight to the role of the minister.

## What About our 'Order'?

Some who agree that there are no theological objections to lay administration of the Lord's Supper, nevertheless object that such a

<sup>8</sup> I owe this observation to D W B Robinson in an unpublished paper 'Presidency and Assistance in Ministering Word and Sacrament: A Note'.



'novelty' would be contrary to Anglican 'order'. 'Order' is a word used in a number of different ways in this debate.

Sometimes 'order' means 'order' as opposed to chaos! What would the proposed change do to our relationships with other Anglicans, and to our relationships with other denominations, particularly the Roman Catholics?

It should be remembered that the Anglican Communion already lives with considerable diversity of opinion and practice. With good will and respect for sincerely held convictions, there is no reason for this change to be of greater concern than other differences. Indeed to suggest that this is the change which we *cannot* make would imply that what binds Anglicans together is some common sacramental theology – and that a theology which few Evangelicals could endorse. These remarks apply with even more force to our relationships with the Roman Catholic denomination.

By 'order' others mean the ordering of ministry in the Anglican Church. Specifically there is commitment to the three 'orders' of bishop, priest, and deacon.

To think that lay administration of the Lord's Supper will be more damaging to these orders than lay preaching has been, suggests that ordination is more about the Sacraments than it is about preaching. This view cannot be supported from either the New Testament or the *Book of Common Prayer*.

In the *Book of Common Prayer* ordination to the priesthood authorizes a person to oversee a congregation: 'how great a treasure (the sheep of Christ) is *committed to your charge*', 'the people *committed to your charge*', 'the people *committed to your cure and charge*', 'them that are or shall be *committed to your charge*'. This oversight is certainly exercised through preaching the Word of God and ministering the Sacraments, but just as a person may be competent to preach sermons from time to time, without all the training and gifts necessary for full time pastoral oversight of the congregation, so such a person may be fully competent to administer the Lord's Supper from time to time, without either being ready to be ordained, or threatening the significance of ordination.

Still others use 'order' as a way of referring to custom. Some feel that it is just too great a change from the way in which Anglicans have always done things and the practice which the *Book of Common Prayer* prescribes. Some may like to call such custom 'tradition'. This is misleading. Theologically the 'tradition' of the Christian Church is the Scriptures. Custom, however ancient, must never be elevated to the level of 'tradition'.

Quite clearly what is being proposed is a change in our customary ways. It is yet another change from the ways prescribed in the *Book of Common Prayer*. However to object to this change, but to accept lay preaching and many other changes to the ways of the church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is arbitrary and unjustified.

So long as there are sound theological objections to our present 'order', appeals to maintain that 'order' (in any of these senses) are not compelling, and amount to merely unprincipled conservatism.

## The Place of the Lord's Supper in Church Life

The Lord's Supper is an important occasion to which 'all such as shall be religiously and devoutly disposed'<sup>9</sup> should come, and 'the people negligent to come'<sup>10</sup> should be exhorted 'that ye will not refuse to come thereto, being so lovingly called and bidden by God himself.'<sup>11</sup> The reasons given in the second Exhortation in the Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper are that to refuse to come when God himself has bidden you is shameful, and a neglect of duty: 'Sore punishments hang over your heads for the same; when ye wilfully abstain from the Lord's Table, and separate from your brethren...'

The proposal to allow persons other than a priest to administer the Lord's Supper has led some to reconsider the place of the Sacrament in the life of the church. Some have found support for the present prohibition in a notion that the Lord's Supper is a complete occasion in which the whole community is involved, and where the appropriate 'president' must be the one with pastoral oversight (the priest). This reasoning rests on two fictions.

*Fiction 1:* that the administration of the Lord's Supper is restricted to the one with pastoral oversight. This (as was pointed out earlier) is not, and has never been, the case. An assistant minister, who is a priest, or a visiting priest can and frequently does administer the Sacrament. An assistant minister who is a deacon or a lay person cannot.

*Fiction 2:* that the Lord's Supper is the essential expression of the whole community's life. This, too, seems to be a novel invention to support a custom that has arisen without any such rationale. The *Book of Common Prayer* has no such notion: 'Every parishioner shall communicate at least

9 From the first Exhortation in The Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper

10 From the rubric preceding the second Exhortation

11 From the second Exhortation

three times in the year.<sup>12</sup> Only three persons need to be present. If a sick person 'be not able to come to the Church'<sup>13</sup> the Lord's Supper can be administered in the sick man's house. In special circumstances a minister may communicate with a sick person with no one else present. The *Book of Common Prayer* does not suggest that the Lord's Supper is the expression of the community life.

Of course there are occasions where it is most appropriate for the one entrusted with the 'cure of souls' in that place to administer the Sacrament, just as there are occasions when it is most appropriate for the Rector to preach. However to extend the argument to say that the Lord's Supper is *always* such an occasion cannot be sustained.

## Conclusion

Change is always difficult, particularly significant change. Change will nearly always be resisted. Change causes unease among some. So we need to take great care with change. But because change will often feel uncomfortable at the start, even change that is called for by sound principles requires a bit of courage. I have tried to work out why some people are uneasy about *this* change.

I have a theory. When you are clear about why you do what you do, then you can be relaxed about changing the forms when this is necessary and helpful.

For example: Evangelicals are generally pretty clear about the purpose of preaching in church. The sermon serves the function of teaching or proclaiming the Word of God, of enabling God's people (and others) to hear God's Word. Since we are clear about the function of preaching, we have had little difficulty coping with a radical change to the form, namely allowing certain lay persons to preach. We can see nowadays that it does not necessarily damage the purpose of preaching. Because we understand the *purpose* clearly, we have no difficulty accepting proper changes to the *form*, so that it can function even better. Indeed I think that most of us can see that to insist that today's preaching be surrounded by the same restrictions, and must take the same form as in the Church of England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would be to hinder the very purpose for which preaching was shaped in the sixteenth century.

However, when you are less clear about why you do what you do, you can find yourself focusing on the form, and thinking that the form matters

12 From the rubrics at the end of The Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper

13 From the rubric at the beginning of The Communion of the Sick

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*in itself*. I take it that that is why we hear people saying: 'It's against Anglican order.' But it can only be 'against' Anglican order if you think that the form is unchangeable. Then lay preaching would be against Anglican order. Lay persons reading Morning Prayer would be against Anglican order. Lay persons taking any part whatsoever in public liturgy would be against Anglican order. But the *Book of Common Prayer* rejects the notion that forms are unchangeable.

I believe that because we are much less clear about the *function* of administering the Lord's Supper than we are about the function of preaching, we feel that this is a more dramatic change in our way of doing things than allowing lay preachers was.

But we are less clear for good reason. The role of the priest in the Lord's Supper, as Cranmer insisted, is not itself important. Of all the ministries mentioned in the New Testament, there is not a word about who should take the leading role at the Lord's Supper, not a word to elders or anyone else that they should do it. That role is relatively unimportant since the focus is not on what that person does, but on the corporate act of remembering the Lord's death together.

Once that is clear, I believe we can see that the change in form will be good and will help people to understand the gospel better. The prohibition as it stands is one of those things that, in the words of the *Book of Common Prayer*, 'at the first was of godly intent and purpose devised, and yet at length has turned to vanity and superstition'. If that is so it *must* be removed, for the sake of the gospel.

I suspect that it will turn out to be a bit like a church I attended in the 1960s, where the priest did *everything* except take up the collection. And that was only done by the wardens. It was unthinkable that anyone else would take up the collection, or that a lay person would read the lesson. We probably thought it was illegal, or at least contrary to church 'order'. Gradually people came to accept that it was not only *legal*, but it was *good* for unnecessary and theologically groundless taboos to be removed from our church life. It helped us (and, importantly, others) to understand the truth of the gospel better. So will the removal of this one.

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