

# A Community Meal

## THE NECESSITY OF BISHOPS AND PRESBYTERS AT THE HOLY COMMUNION



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## THE NECESSITY OF BISHOPS AND PRESBYTERS FOR THE HOLY COMMUNION

During times of crisis that include confinement—such as the current COVID-19 pandemic—it is reasonable to wonder why Christians should not be allowed to practice home Communion, to consecrate their own elements and continue to center their worship around the Table. Does it need to be a bishop or presbyter who is overseeing this process?

In the Diocese of the Rocky Mountains, we hold that the consecration of the elements during a Communion service by a bishop or presbyter—and only a bishop or presbyter—is a right and good thing. Yet, its theological foundation is not necessarily obvious. And so, it is worth exploring the complexity of this question from the Bible as well as tradition and current canon law.

### I. BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

To whom was the responsibility of the Holy Communion given? The New Testament evidence does not clearly support a restriction. In the Gospels, it is clear that Jesus institutes the Communion meal in the context of a Passover meal and then commands its practice to his disciples.<sup>1</sup> Should we limit the scope of presiding at the Table to clergy based on *his audience*? While Hebrews later refers to Jesus as a priest after Melchizedek, no participant at that last supper would have considered any present to be a priest.<sup>2</sup> And while eleven of those present were to become apostles, should presiding be limited to those of their eventual office? Such a case is difficult to make without applying an inconsistent hermeneutic (as surely not all commands given to the disciples would be limited this way—the commission of Matt 28:18-20, for example). Likewise, in 1 Corinthians, it is clear that Paul is not writing to any particular leadership group within the Corinthian church, but to the church as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Beyond these particular references to the Holy Communion, the New Testament concept of *the priesthood of all believers* would also suggest that no special status is required for priestly acts.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, of course, this a significantly more complex question than just these few passages can address. The context of the practice of the Holy Communion and its institution must also be considered. For this, we should consider both the nature and context of the ritual act as well as leadership within the community.

#### 1. *The Nature and Context of the Ritual Act*

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<sup>1</sup> See Mark 14:22-26, Matt 26:26-29, Luke 22:14-20, and 1 Cor 11:17-34.

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 7 addresses the priesthood of Melchizedek in general, focusing the comparison with Jesus in Heb 7:21-22. Apart from this, none of the participants at that Passover meal would have been considered priests—a particular office which required being of a particular lineage and particular training—by the contemporary Jewish understanding of that term (ἱερεὺς).

<sup>3</sup> He seems to be addressing all of the church members throughout the letter (1 Cor 1:2, 10; 5:1-4; 12:27), but also particularly in this passage (1 Cor 11:17-18, 21, 28-29).

<sup>4</sup> See 1 Pet 2:4-8; Rev 1:4-6; 5:6-10, and 20:6.



The Holy Communion itself is a ritual meal with a particular pattern.

- From 1 Corinthians, it seems that the Holy Communion was practiced in the corporate gathering of the church. While this was almost certainly within *churches located in homes* in some places, it was not only in homes and it does not seem to be typically limited to the members of a particular household.<sup>5</sup> Rather, it seems to be within the corporate gathering of the local church body.
- The Holy Communion meal is more than a community meal, but it is not less. While a significant aspect of the ritual act is participating in the spiritual reality of union with Christ (vertical communion), it is also a visible sign of relationships with the church (horizontal communion). According to Paul in 1 Corinthians, the ability to gather and be reconciled to one another and share in the meal is an essential aspect of the meal.<sup>6</sup>
- The Communion ritual is a sacred and solemn act. This much is clear in the context of Jesus's words at the Passover meal he had with his disciples. Likewise, Paul's exhortations to self-examination and the possibility of eating and drinking judgment upon oneself are not to be taken lightly. In fact, Paul's entire purpose in discussing the Holy Communion in 1 Corinthians 11 is that this immature church was not taking the nature of this ritual seriously, but instead using it for selfish gain. It is, therefore, important that we treat the Holy Communion with honor and as a spiritual act to be taken seriously. Our liturgy, the context of a corporate gathering of the church, the necessity of reading and preaching and praying, and the presiding of leaders who have undergone significant training and have been ordained or consecrated for this ministry are part of how we demonstrate such respect.
- The antecedent of the Holy Communion is the Passover, itself a meal with a centralized communal aspect to it. While the initial Passover predates the Tabernacle, the annual celebration of the Passover—a family meal admittedly served in homes—very quickly required a connection to the wider community through gathering at the Tabernacle—the place of corporate worship and God's presence.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Leadership Within the Community

Likewise, leadership within the New Testament church is ordered.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor 11:22 clearly indicates that the gathering of this church required many to leave their houses. It is also clear from Acts 6:1-7 that the church was gathering for meals. With the number of converts present in Jerusalem (see Acts 2:41) and that they were already practicing table fellowship (Acts 2:46), and that their number was increasing (Acts 2:47, 6:7), it is unlikely they were meeting only in houses. That the Holy Communion took place during a corporate gathering (or equivalent to a church service) is made clear in 1 Cor 11:17.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Cor 11:33-34.

<sup>7</sup> See Exod 23:14-17; 34:18-23; and Deut 16:1-17. This practice is still expected after the exile and in relationship to the Temple in 2 Chron 35:1-19. While the Gospels don't make mention of Jesus or his disciples presenting themselves at the Temple specifically in relationship to the Passover meal, the silence of the Gospels on this should be taken neither as support nor challenge to the expectation.

- The biblical pattern—established within the Old Testament for the people of God and continued in the New Testament—is that the people of God are a covenant community with structure and order.<sup>8</sup>
- In particular, the church had rightly set aside those whose responsibility it is to manage the church (i.e., household of God): the *episkopos* (ἐπίσκοπος) and the *presbyter* (πρεσβύτερος). It wasn't that the *episkopos* or *presbyter* had special powers (such as those needed for invoking the real presence at the Communion), but that they had the specific responsibility of leading the church(es) in apostolic ministry.<sup>9</sup>
- The biblical theological continuity between the Old Testament priesthood and the New Testament leadership of the church should not be dismissed or ignored. While there is also continuity between the Old Testament priesthood and the priesthood of all believers, it is sensible that some within the New Testament church should have particular responsibility for leadership in ritual acts.<sup>10</sup> The Old Testament priesthood had the particular responsibility for making the commemorative sacrifice at the Passover—the typological act anticipating the death and resurrection of Jesus enacted in the Holy Communion.<sup>11</sup>
- Such leaders are also specifically qualified and trained for the responsibilities of leadership. From the Levitical priesthood to the office holders of the New Testament church, part of setting aside leadership was training them in the skills and knowledge needed for such leadership.

Given the communal nature of the Holy Communion ritual and the biblical practice of appointing particular church leaders to lead in the gathering of the church, it seems wise and with significant biblical precedent that a bishop or presbyter should preside over the Holy Communion.

## II. HISTORICAL THEOLOGY AND ANGLICAN TRADITION

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<sup>8</sup> Scores of texts could be cited in relationship to the ordering of God's people from establishment of the Levitical priesthood (Exod 28:1-3) to the appointment of leaders in the church (see 1 Tim 3:1-13).

<sup>9</sup> The management of the household is a responsibility clearly given to the *episkopos* in 1 Tim 3:1-7. It is important to note that this particular assignment is referenced in the context of the corporate gathering of the church (see 1 Tim 2:1, 8; 3:14-15). That this responsibility is shared with *presbyters* becomes clear in considering Acts 20:17-38 and Titus 1:5-16. How it is shared is an interesting question in biblical studies, but well beyond the scope of this paper. Likewise, while we maintain the tradition of calling the local leader a *priest*, we also insist on retaining the title of *presbyter*. And it is the *episkopos* or the *presbyter*, in the New Testament, who then *presides* in the church service, particularly at the Holy Communion.

<sup>10</sup> See above notes on the *priesthood of all believers* as well as the above notes on the New Testament practice of designating some to preside at the corporate gatherings of the church.

<sup>11</sup> See Lev 16:1-5, 29-34. For the typological connection, see Heb 9:11–10:18. See 2 Chron 35:10-12. "When the service had been prepared for, the priests stood in their place, and the Levites in their divisions according to the king's command. And they slaughtered the Passover lamb, and the priests threw the blood that they received from them while the Levites flayed the sacrifices. And they set aside the burnt offerings that they might distribute them according to the groupings of the fathers' houses of the lay people, to offer to the LORD, as it is written in the Book of Moses. And so they did with the bulls." See also Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2006).

While the biblical arguments above should be sufficient, it is important to note that the Christian church has invariably assumed that the pastoral role of gathering and guarding the local church necessarily means that the Holy Communion must be presided over by a priest/minister and as part of a service in which the Word of God is rightly proclaimed.<sup>12</sup> From Justin Martyr’s very early description of a Eucharistic service, to the description offered by John Calvin, it is historic Christian tradition.<sup>13</sup> It is likewise the assumed practice within our particular tradition.<sup>14</sup> As the Dublin Statement on the Eucharist states: “The liturgical functions of the ordained arise out of pastoral responsibility. Separating liturgical function and pastoral oversight tends to reduce liturgical presidency to an isolated ritual function.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, this concern for pastoral oversight has profound implications for the practice of church discipline.<sup>16</sup> Both the Anglican concern for church order, and the sad reality that a lack of order leads to schism, should not be dismissed. Anglican ministry is ordered ministry.

Such order also applies to the particular way in which the Holy Communion is practiced. The 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*—one of our formularies and the only liturgical required of clergy by written subscription—articulates a very specific order and set of practices for presiding at the Holy Communion.<sup>17</sup> It describes, in some detail, not only the words spoken by the presiding bishop or presbyter, but the specific actions taken, including: 1) taking the paten into his hands, 2) taking the bread and laying his hands upon it, 3) taking the cup into his hands, and 4) laying his hands upon every vessel of wine to be consecrated.<sup>18</sup> Following such directions (rubrics) not only requires a bishop or presbyter, but it requires a bishop or presbyter to be physically present with the elements (and thereby eliminates the possibility of remote consecration).

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<sup>12</sup> See our diocesan statement on this subject. Theology Work Group of the Anglican Diocese of the Rocky Mountains, “Keeping the Feast: Guidance on Church Discipline and the Eucharist,” January 2020.

<sup>13</sup> See Justin Martyr’s *First Apology*. See especially Justin, *1 Apol.*, 65, where he writes: “There is then brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of wine mixed with water; and he taking them, gives praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and offers thanks at considerable length for our being counted worthy to receive these things at His hands.” See also Calvin’s *Institutes*, where he likewise notes the uniformity of historic tradition that all should partake of both element, all while assuming the presiding of a priest/minister. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.17.48-49. See also “No sound Christian makes all men equal in the administration of Word and Sacraments, not only because all things ought to be done in the Church decently and in order, but also because, by the special command of Christ, Ministers are ordained for that purpose. Therefore, as a special call is required, no man who is not called may take the honour upon himself.” John Calvin, *Calvin’s Tracts: Containing Antidote to the Council of Trent*, (Vol. 3, Canon X, 7th Session; trans. H. Beveridge; Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 177.

<sup>14</sup> See the *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion*. Note especially that the articles on sacraments not only assume that an ordained minister is presiding, but go so far as to question the worthiness of such ministers (Article 26) and the consecration of such minister (Article 36).

<sup>15</sup> International Anglican Liturgical Consultation, *Dublin Statement*, 1995.

<sup>16</sup> For more information on our approach to church discipline, see the Theology Work Group of the Anglican Diocese of the Rocky Mountains, “Keeping the Feast: Guidance on Church Discipline and the Eucharist,” January 2020.

<sup>17</sup> For more information about subscribing to the *Book of Common Prayer*, see the *Canons of the Diocese of the Rocky Mountains*, Title III, Canon 2, Section 4.

<sup>18</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1892), 251.



### III. CANONICAL PRACTICE

Whether one agrees with the biblical and theological arguments already articulated, as well as the historic practice of the Church, it should be noted that the celebration of the Holy Communion by only bishops and presbyters is a matter of both provincial and diocesan canon law.<sup>19</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Given the complex but still important biblical background, the historic practice of the church, and the current requirements of canon law, it is right and good that a bishop or presbyter should consecrate the elements of the Holy Communion. Of course, these are extraordinary times and it is worth considering how we continue with our practice of participating in the Holy Communion. But lest we rob the ritual act of its gravity or carelessly imply that the Holy Communion is necessary for salvation—and so the nature and context of it is malleable in order to make sure it happens—we advise being incredibly cautious in how we think and talk about it. It is right and good that bishops and presbyters—and only bishops and presbyters—preside at the Table. While it is not a matter of explicit New Testament command, it is a matter of biblical respect for the ritual act and a biblical understanding of the ordering of the church that has been practiced by Christians since the dawn of the Church and is enshrined in our canons.

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<sup>19</sup> See the *Constitution and Canons of the Anglican Church of North America*, Title II, Canon 4, Section 3, part 1. See, likewise, the *Canons of the Diocese of the Rocky Mountains*, Title II, Canon 3, Section 2, part 1.