

THE REAL PRESENCE WHO CREATES REAL CHANGE

by
Bennett W. Ellison

One of the many gifts we inherit in our Anglican tradition is a historic faith. It is a faith that has been tried and endured through centuries of theological development. Our faith is rooted in a tradition that forms individuals and communities through their participation in the liturgy. When we join in the participation of the liturgy, we are joining in its rich theological developments as well. One of the central elements of Anglican liturgy is the Eucharist. Every individual is being formed through the Eucharistic liturgy, but there are certainly many who are uninformed on the theological richness provided in our Anglican tradition. For the purposes of this essay, I will analyze the Eucharistic theology of John Wesley. Wesley was an Anglican priest in the 18th century who desired to see spiritual renewal from within the Church of England. He was a practical systematic theologian meaning he could be systematic in the formal sense of parsing out theology, but his theology was never developed at the expense of its practicality. There is no practice taken more seriously by Wesley than that of communion. My hope that a closer look into our Anglican liturgy alongside Wesley's Eucharistic theology may enliven our Eucharistic experience of Christ.

The Real Presence Meets Us

Wesley's Eucharistic theology combats any reductionist thinking of the Lord's Supper being a bare representation. In contrast to figures like Zwingli who saw the Eucharist as merely symbolic, Wesley believed the real presence of Christ is found at the table. "And thus, his body and blood have every where, but especially at this sacrament, a true and real presence."¹ When we come to the table, we come for a real encounter with the risen Lord. The implications of "do this in remembrance of me" go much further than a mental recollection of a past event. Hear Wesley's desire in his coming to the Lord's table.

"The wants of those who receive it: who seek **not a bare representation or remembrance**. I want and seek my Savior himself, and I haste to this Sacrament for the purpose that St. Peter and John hastened to his sepulchre: because I hope to find him there."²

¹ Brevint, Daniel, and John Wesley. *The christian sacrament and sacrifice: extracted from a late author*. (G. Story, North-Green, Worship-Street, *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, 1800), 11.

² Brevint, Daniel, and John Wesley. *The christian sacrament and sacrifice: extracted from a late author*, 9

Nobody *struts* to the table, but we should all haste to it. With Wesley, we ought to be in haste with full expectation to meet the risen Lord. This spiritual reality should cause our hearts to celebrate. Each Eucharist, literally meaning *thanksgiving*, is our giving thanks that Christ was crucified and *is* risen. For Wesley, the Eucharist is not “bare representation” in terms of symbolism, but it most certainly is a re-presentation of the whole paschal story. The whole story of Christ- life, death, and resurrection- is proclaimed in this meal. The risen Christ comes to meet us, and he brings his whole story to the table with him.

The Real Presence Changes Us

Our tradition states that a sacrament is “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us; ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive the same, and a pledge to assure us thereof.”³ The Eucharist is a sign of grace and an instrument through which we receive it. Wesley made it clear that something is given to us as we partake in the Eucharist.

“I come then to God’s altar, with a full persuasion, that these words, *this is my body*, promise me more than *a figure*; that this holy banquet is not a bare *memorial* only, but may actually *convey* as many blessings to me, as it brings curses on the prophane receiver.”⁴

We can find great assurance in the fact that grace and blessings are conveyed to us in the meal, but does the grace produce any change? Our tradition, Mr. Wesley included, would say something happens to us through this meal. In the prayer of Humble Access we pray, “Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son, Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.”⁵ These blessings conveyed to us clean the body and soul. Every time we come to the table, we are asking God to create a change in us. The Eucharist is less about God changing the elements and more about how God changes us through the elements.

³ 1789 book of common prayer: Catechism. (n.d.).

<http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1789/Catechism.htm>

⁴ Brevint, Daniel, and John Wesley. *The christian sacrament and sacrifice: extracted from a late author*, 13-14

⁵ *Book of Common Prayer*, (Huntington Beach, CA, Anglican Liturgy Press, 2019), 135

This is where the understanding of Christ's real presence becomes vital. We should never confuse the instruments of God's grace as the agent of change. It always God who meets and brings about the change. Wesley explains it well:

"I know, that clay has nothing in itself to which can impart grace, holiness and salvation. But I know also that is the ordinary way of God, to produce his greatest works, at the presence (tho' not by the power) of the most useful instruments. At the very stroke of a rod, he divided the sea...and when but a shadow went by, or some oil dropped, or clothes were touched by those that were sick, presently *virtue went out*, not of rods, or shadows, or clothes, but of himself."⁶

Clay, a rod, a shadow, oil, clothes. These become the instruments, the means, through which God does something to us. The "clay has nothing in itself to...impart" any blessing that we are desirous of, yet Wesley understood God "to produce his greatest works" through these common means. And Wesley is not shy in regarding how he viewed the means themselves as powerless. "Before you use any means, let it be deeply impressed on your soul; -- there is no power in this. It is, in itself, a poor, dead, empty thing: Separate from God, it is a dry leaf, a shadow."⁷ "Separate from God," these means are dead and empty. They are powerless and useless without God. All sacraments, and truly all things in creation, are powerless and useless without God. But praise be to God that the Eucharist will never be separate from Himself. The real presence of Christ and the Eucharist can never be separate because it is Christ who gives us the Eucharist. And it is Christ who has chosen this ordinance as the channels for us to receive him. These means do not become powerful in the sense that they are given intrinsic power now that Christ is present. Rather, they can now be *effective* **because** Christ in His own power is ready to use them.

To illustrate, think about the difference in an electric screwdriver and a traditional screwdriver. Christ's power in the Eucharist is **not** like the electric screwdriver which needs batteries to give power, and thus be effective. The electric screwdriver needs to be powered within itself to be useful. This is surely not the case for the consecrated elements. No power is

⁶ Brevint, Daniel, and John Wesley, *The christian sacrament and sacrifice: extracted from a late author*, 14

⁷ Wesley Center Online, The Wesley Center Online: Sermon 16 - The Means Of Grace. (n.d.). <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-16-the-means-of-grace/>, 4.

applied to the nature, or composition, of the bread and wine themselves. Consider now the traditional screwdriver. It has no inherent power in itself. And no power can be added in the metallic composition of the screwdriver. But this instrument becomes effective only when someone uses it. Properly speaking, it is the energy of the user which is then applied *through* the instrument. Any power or transformation that happens through the Eucharist is because Christ himself is the source, and He chooses to convey such blessings through ordinary, powerless instruments.

My beloved mentor, Eucharistic scholar Dr. Bob Stamps, summarizes it well, “In the long run, nothing works in God's stead, i.e., nothing works for God without God. Everything works... because God is in it, because God works through it. The vitality of the sacrament is the real presence of the real Christ- not some confectioned 'ontic entity' on the Altar.”⁸

Conclusion

The holy Eucharist has been the central practice of Christ followers since the birth of the Church. Our Anglican tradition honors this practice well and it is my hope that we participate in the fullness of Christ and all his benefits when we feast at his table. Our liturgy gives us the language for what to ask. We humble ourselves. We ask God to sanctify the elements and us. We ask God to feed us. We are indebted to the liturgy which gives us the words for how to approach this meal. We are likewise indebted to those who have given us language outside of the prayerbook for how we are to come to the table. Many Anglicans, and any Christian for that matter, would benefit greatly from Wesley's Eucharistic theology. His works are not a contradiction to the Book of Common Prayer. Rather, his works build upon the historic faith which has shaped the Book of Common Prayer. Wesley serves as a guide who can take modern Anglicans further into the richness of our historic tradition. His theological contributions cover a wide range of Christian theology, yet I find his Eucharistic theology to be some of his most invigorating work. Wesley never broke from his Anglican roots and neither did his theology. Rather than proposing something new about the Eucharist, he gave us new ways to understand and articulate what God has always been doing in the Eucharist. The real Christ meets us the table. His presence makes the feast. He, who is grace, uses this blessed sacrament as the means to feed us with himself. As he feeds us with the

⁸ From one of the many email correspondences that I have with Dr. Stamps.

spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood, we receive his grace. As often as we do this, he changes us through his grace.