

The Anglican Doctrine of the Eucharistic
Sacrifice

Introduction and Bibliographical Guide

(by The Revd. Dr. R. J. Halliburton)

A first glance at the Anglican formularies, homilies and treatises of the Reformation period might suggest that for the English Reformers, the eucharistic sacrifice was a doctrine to be refuted rather than propagated. Cranmer, for example, is clearly unhappy with the notion that (at the eucharist), they (sc. the celebrating priests), 'every day slay Christ and shed his blood'; in the thirty first Article of Religion, the 'sacrifices of masses' are written off as 'blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits'; and even as late as 1640, canon law feels bound to explain that 'the situation of the holy table doth not imply that it is or ought to be esteemed a true and proper altar, whereon Christ is again really sacrificed.'

Scholarship in this century, however, has suggested that the doctrine against which the English Reformers protested was in fact a debased late mediaeval view of the eucharist (so B. J. Kidd in 1898), that erroneous opinions were formulated on account of the a priori supposition in late mediaeval theology that sacrifice involved primarily the death of a victim, and that the circumstances leading up to it were ignored (so Dr. F. C. N. Bickes in 1930); that the Protestants argued 'Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; therefore the Eucharist cannot be a sacrifice'; and the catholics replied, 'But the Eucharist is a sacrifice, therefore Christ must in some sense be put to death' (so E. L. Mascall in Corpus Christi 2nd edition 1965). Kidd's thesis has been challenged by Francis Clark, (The Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reformation, 1960), and Clark's criticism questioned by Mascall (op.cit.), A. A. Stephenson and more recently by J. J. Hughes. The outcome of this debate, however, would seem to be that whatever we may think of the doctrine which the Reformers sought to refute, they were to a greater or lesser extent 'tilting at windmills'; and I would suggest that in the present debate, we would be ill advised to be spectators at their tilting match, but would be more profitably employed in the examination of their more positive teaching. No Anglican, we shall see can seriously discuss the eucharist without some reference to the sacrifice of Christ.

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The shape of Anglican teaching can already be discerned in the writings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. On the one hand, the eucharist is said to be a remembrance of the death of Christ (so the Catechism of 1549, where the eucharist is described as 'the continual remembrance of the sacrifice of the death of Christ and of the benefits which we receive thereby'; and the Prayer of Consecration, in which it is asserted that we celebrate a 'perpetual memory of that his precious death until his coming again'). Bilson too would say that the 'very supper is a public memorial of that great and dreadful sacrifice', but others, such as Ridley, choose the term representation; at his disputation at Oxford in 1555, he answered that 'in the Mass, the passion of Christ is not in verity, but in mystery representing the same'. Others again would say that the sacrifice we offer is one of prayer and praise (so Crammer, On the Lord's Supper Parker Soc. ed. p. 346), or again that at the eucharist we offer ourselves, our souls and bodies (so the first prayer after the communion in the 1552 Book of Common Prayer).

Most of these notions recur in the writings of the seventeenth century divines. Sufficient account of these may be found in Fr. Symond's useful study The Council of Trent and the Anglican Formularies and texts may be studied in P. E. More and F. L. Cross's anthology, Anglicanism. I would simply add here two further reflexions on the doctrine which these writers supply. The first is the notion that at the eucharist, the sacrifice of Christ is in some sense 'made present'. Lancelot Andrewes writes that 'we are in this action not only carried up to Christ, but we are also carried back to Christ as He was at this instant, and in the very act of His offering By the incomprehensible power of His eternal Spirit, not He alone, but He as at the very act of His offering is made present to us.' This opinion is clearly related to the notions of memorial or representation, and modern studies on the interpretation of the word 'memoria' or 'anamnesis' have shown that to remember can in certain contexts mean 'to bring into the present' (cf. the modern text of Series II, in which the words 'Do this in remembrance of me' are translated, 'Do this to recall me'.)

This notion of 'making present' or 'remembering' (in a special sense) is also related to another kind of language about the eucharist. Some authors would say that although the sacrifice of Christ was a once for all event in history, it is in eternity continually offered in the heavenly tabernacle, as the Epistle to the Hebrews would have us believe. In the 17th century, the relationship of the eucharist to this eternal and heavenly sacrifice is articulated by Jeremy Taylor. 'As Christ is a priest in heaven for ever,' he writes, 'and yet does not sacrifice himself afresh nor yet without a sacrifice could he be a priest; but by a daily ministrations and intercession, represents his sacrifice to God, and offers himself as

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sacrificed, so He does upon earth by the ministry of his servants; He is offered up to God; that is He is by prayers and the Sacrament represented or offered up to God as sacrificed.' (Life of Christ 3.15, cit. Symonds op. cit.) Taylor in this, one feels comes close to St. Augustine's teaching that in the eucharist, the whole Christ is offered by the whole Church; or 'in that which she (sc. the Church) offers, she herself is offered'. But one cannot escape the conclusion that by the end of the seventeenth century, a style of discourse about the eucharistic sacrifice was definitely emerging from the pens of those who professed loyalty to the Anglican communion.

The nineteenth century controversies need not concern us for long. Tractarianism and the later Ritualism naturally aroused deep-seated fears amongst the more Evangelical of English churchmen, who considered that 'High Church' theology of the eucharistic sacrifice implied a betrayal of the principles of the Reformation and the tradition as represented in Scripture. High Church reaction to Evangelical criticism led to some of the former persuasion levelling charges of Zwinglianism against the Evangelicals, accusing them of teaching that the eucharist was a 'bare commemoration' of some far distant event. That the catholic Anglican does not believe in the re-immolation of Christ at each eucharist, and that the evangelical Anglican does not hold to the doctrine of 'empty commemoration' is well argued by E. L. Mascall and E. M. B. Green in the report 'Growing into Unity' (edited by J. I. Packer and the Bishop of Willesden). Needless to say, prejudice dies hard and the old misunderstandings are not yet a dead letter. But here again, it will probably be found more profitable to examine catholic and evangelical Anglicans 'doing theology' rather than engaging in polemics, and in the last section of this introduction, we shall look at some official Anglican pronouncements and the manner in which they reflect continuing Anglican theology.

As examples of official Anglican pronouncements, we can select the report 'Doctrine in the Church of England' (being the report of the Commission on Christian Doctrine appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in 1922), and the committee report on the eucharist from the 1958 Lambeth Conference. In the first of these, considerable space is given to the examination of the Old Testament doctrine of sacrifice, a brief note on the history of the doctrine from the Didache to St. Thomas Aquinas, on the Reformation controversy and on the Caroline Divines, concluding with an account of current opinions in the early 1920s. The notions of sacrifice which the report admits are in fact those we have already encountered; clearly there is a definite association between the Last Supper and Calvary and between our eucharistic celebrations and the sacrifice of Christ; clearly too, some can speak of the eucharistic rite as the 'representation before the Father' of the actual sacrifice of the Cross, while some again will see in the eucharist our participating in the perpetual sacrifice which Christ eternally offers on the Heavenly Altar. Mention too must be made of the offering of ourselves, souls and bodies, and of the offering of our prayer

and praise. None of these notions is universally accepted amongst Anglicans (the report states), no one of these notions necessarily excludes the others; but it is generally agreed that 'if the Eucharist is thus spoken of as a sacrifice, it must be understood as a sacrifice in which (to speak exactly as the subject allows) we do not offer Christ, but where Christ unites us with Himself in the self offering of the life that was "obedient unto death, yea, the death of the Cross"'.

The Lambeth 1958 Conference reflects a similar approach though we may perhaps see in it some of the insights of the theology of the intervening years. The Committee having spoken of the sacrifice of Christ as the offering of his whole life in obedience to the Father, says of the eucharist:

'In our baptism we are united with him by the likeness of his death (Romans 6.5.) and in the eucharist we abide in him as we eat his Body and drink his Blood (John 6.56.). So we come to the Father in and through Jesus our great High Priest. We have nothing to offer that we have not first received, but we offer our praise and thanksgiving for Christ's sacrifice for us and so present it again and ourselves before the Father in him. We are partakers of the sacrifice of Christ (I. Cor. 10.16) and this is shown forth by our sacrifice of praise to God continually through Christ (Heb. 13.15.) and by our life of service and suffering for his sake in the world (Phil. 3.9,10). We ourselves, incorporate in the mystical body of Christ are the sacrifice we offer. Christ with us offers himself to God.' (P. 2.84.)

Clearly, this report, like that of 1922 is attempting to reconcile a number of views which again are not mutually exclusive. Cognisance has evidently been taken of eucharistic theology which flourished in England (as on the Continent) between the wars and in the post-war years. English churchmen have been able to derive much benefit from the work of liturgical scholars of the stature of W. H. Frere and Dom Gregory Dix, and from theologians such as A. G. Herbert, L. S. Thornton, and E. L. Mascall (to name but three). Sacrifice is no longer taken as a concept, limited in its significance to the slaying or death of a victim, the idea of the sacrifice of ourselves, souls and bodies, prayer and praise is still contained, and the sense of the Church as a body, involved in the sacrifice of Christ because she is his body, and therefore in a sense offering with him the one and unrepeatable sacrifice - these ideas seem to have commended themselves to the Anglican bishops in 1958 much as they did to Jeremy Taylor in the 17th century or indeed to St. Augustine in the fifth.

One final point needs to be stressed. Concern for the right expression of the doctrine of the eucharistic sacrifice is by no means confined to the so-called Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England. No-one would class Professor Moule, A. M. Stibbs, Dr. J. I. Packer and E. M. B. Green as 'High Churchmen', but each has written constructively and usefully on the eucharist and its relationship to the sacrifice of Christ, in a manner which

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many of more 'catholic' persuasion would find most acceptable. It does in fact seem that agreement can be reached among Anglicans of different persuasions concerning a doctrine which has, and in some cases still does arouse a good deal of controversy. The task in front of us today would seem to be to reassure ourselves that agreement of this kind is indeed possible; and that if and when an agreed teaching can be arrived at, to ensure that this teaching is propagated by the most efficient catechetical means at our disposal.

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PROPOSITIONS CONCERNING THE EUCHARISTIC SACRIFICE

For Discussion

1. Christ redeems us by the sacrifice of his life, by his death and by his resurrection and ascension.
2. Christ instituted the eucharist as a memorial of his redeeming sacrifice.
3. At the eucharist, the Church, which is the body of Christ, participates in the sacrifice of Christ. The whole Christ in fact offers the whole Christ. 'In that which she offers, she herself is offered.'
4. As by his sacrifice, Christ offered on behalf of mankind and the whole created order the praise and thanksgiving due to the Father and obtained redemption for the whole of creation, so we, by participating in this sacrifice at the eucharist are enabled to offer true praise and worship to the Father and obtain the benefits of redemption.
5. It is by participation in the eucharist that we are enabled to offer ourselves, souls and bodies, our prayers and praises as a 'living sacrifice' to the Father through Christ. (cf. Romans 12.1.). This offering of ours is both the fruit of the eucharist, and at the eucharist becomes one with the offering of Christ himself.

A proposal

It would seem that if agreement can be reached on the right manner of talking about the eucharistic sacrifice, a catechism/tele/radio cast should be composed as a means of propagating the agreed teaching to the faithful.

Such a catechism might cover the following main themes:

The idea of memorial

The Jewish Passover celebrations

The Last Supper and the sacrifice of Christ

The eucharist in different traditions

Explanation.
