The Reformers' Doctrine of the Holy Communion

By The Rev. C. Sydney Carter, M.A., D.D., F.R.Hist.S.

"WE will have the Sacrament to hang over the high altar, there to be worshipped and only to be delivered to the lay people at Easter, and then only in one kind." "We will have the Mass in Latin, as was before, and celebrated by the priest without any man or woman communicating with him."[1]

These were the demands of the 'Rebels in the West' to Cranmer in 1549, and they illustrate clearly the medieval practice and teaching concerning the Eucharist which our Reformers strongly condemned. They also prove that the doctrine of the Holy Communion centred round two closely related questions. Are the Body and Blood of Christ literally present in, under or with the consecrated elements, or only present to faith? The Reformers definitely declared that they were 'only present to faith'. Is the Lord's Supper the commemoration of a finished sacrifice or is it itself a propitiatory material sacrifice? The Reformers taught the former and denied the latter.

I

Cranmer's direct answer to these 'Rebels' was that in Apostolic times the bread had never been 'reserved' or 'worshipped' (i.e. made to "hang over the high altar"), but used by the faithful as a divinely appointed means of fellowship and communion. Instead of being delivered to the lay people only at Easter, which was their demand, Cranmer declared that "all learned and godly men have exhorted Christian people often to receive the Communion", and that in the Apostles' time people received it *every day*, and afterwards three or four times a week, and 'commonly everywhere once a week' ".[2] We find confirmation of this statement in Acts xx. 7 in connection with St. Paul's visit to Troas, that "upon the first day of the week the disciples gathered together to break bread". And the Didache, at the end of the first century, enjoins that "on the Lord's day" all Christians should "come together and break bread";[3] although some scholars now hold that this refers to a *Jewish* fellowship meal rather than to the Lord's Supper. In Justin's *Apology*, a weekly celebration of the Eucharist is carefully described. We then get a gap in records for about two centuries, and it is from this latter period that Cranmer's further remarks probably apply, when he adds: "When the Spirit of God began to wax more cold in men's hearts, then their desire was not so hot to receive the Communion as before. And as the world waxed more wicked, the more people withdrew themselves from the Holy Communion. But to them that live godly it is the

[1] Carter, *The English Church and the Reformation*, p. 127.
[2] Cranmer, *Remains*, p. 174.
[3] *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, ch. xiv, p. 85.

greatest comfort that in this world can be imagined ".[1] And he also reminds them of an early decree ordering that all Christians " must receive the Communion at least three times a year, at Easter, Whitsun, and Christmas ".

Gradually, however, false ideas, and teaching of a propitiatory sacrifice being *offered* at the Communion, began to appear, as in the Sacramentaries of Popes Leo and Gregory, so that a Scriptural *memorial* of redemption became an unscriptural doctrine of the *Sacrifice* of the Mass, and fastened itself on the early Eucharistic service of praise and thanksgiving. This sacrifice the Western ' Rebels ' wished to restore. E. Burbidge, in his instructive book *Liturgies and Offices in the Church* (1885), declares that " previous to the Reformation our forefathers had been accustomed to a service which was farther removed from the simplicity of the Ancient Liturgies than any other service of ancient or modern times " (p. 105).

Consequently, infrequency of Communion started as early as Bede's time, since he reports that " the more religious only communicate three times a year ". The ordinary worshipper regularly attended Mass, and ' gazed adoringly ' on the sacred elements, an act which he believed conveyed spiritual benefits to him. Our Reformers therefore made full provision for restoring the Apostolic and primitive practice of ' frequent Communions ', and we should remember that the Early Tractarians in advocating *frequent* Communions were following Cranmer and the Protestant Reformers. It was ' solitary masses '—the *damnosa hereditas* of the Middle Ages—which led their successors to revert to ' infrequent Communions ', which our early Evangelicals *corrected*.

But our Reformers denounced the current teaching of the propitiatory sacrifice of the Mass as entirely contrary to Scripture, since such a doctrine involved the belief that the Body and Blood of Christ was literally present in, under or with the consecrated elements, instead of being present only to the faith of the recipient. It involved, as well, the medieval teaching of transubstantiation. Thus *before* the Reformation, the ' Mass Sacrifice ' had superseded the primitive Communion, and so our Reformers determined to " turn the Mass into a Communion ". Gardiner had to subscribe an Article in 1550 declaring that the Mass was full of abuses, invented and devised by the bishops of Rome, and therefore justly taken away by the Statutes of the Realm, and " the Communion placed *in the stead thereof* ". As Bishop Jewel said a little later, " *We* give unto the people the Lord's Supper according to the Institution of Christ, and have made it a Communion in very deed. *They* (the Romanists) give you a vain pageant to gaze upon ".[2] This was no empty boast, but was abundantly justified by the teaching of our Reformed Formularies and Articles of Faith ; so that the Bennet Judgment (1869) correctly ruled that " any presence which is not a presence to the soul of the faithful receiver, the Church does not by her Articles and formularies affirm ". The Judge then further declared that the Body of Christ

[1] Cranmer, op. cit., 174.

[2] *English Church and the Reformation*, p. 222.

" is given by God only, and not by the priest, is taken by faith only and not by the hand, is eaten by the soul only and not by the mouth ".[1]

II

This eucharistic teaching was the great battleground of the Reformation, since Cranmer and all our Reformers repudiated the medieval doctrine of a real objective Presence in the elements by virtue of consecration, and enunciated instead the real spiritual Presence of Christ to the soul of the faithful recipient of the sacrament. As Cranmer put it, " The roots of the weeds is the popish doctrine of transubstantiation, of the real presence of Christ's flesh and blood in the sacrament of the altar (as they call it), and of the sacrifice and oblation of Christ made by the priest for the salvation of quick and dead ". And he added that once " these were suffered to grow again in the Lord's vineyard, they will overspread all the ground again with the old errors and superstitions.[2] It is certain therefore that Cranmer and his colleagues were determined carefully to exclude such teaching from the doctrine and worship of the Reformed Church which they enshrined and authorised in their Prayer Book and 42 Articles of Religion (1553).

Now the 29th of these Articles definitely condemns the *realem et corporalem* presence of Christ in the Eucharist, since the Reformers interpreted ' real ' as signifying ' real *corporal* ' or carnal, as opposed to real *spiritual* presence. As Cranmer said, " No more truly is Christ corporally or *really* present in the due ministration of the Lord's Supper than He is in the administration of baptism ".[3] Yet in the previous sentence he had declared that " the benefit of Christ's body that was crucified for us, and of His blood that was shed for us, be *really* and effectually present with all them that duly receive the Sacraments; but all this I understand of His spiritual presence ". In 1562, Article 29 of 1552 was altered by the omission of the long explanatory clause about the *realem et corporalem* presence : " Forasmuch as the truth of man's nature requireth, that the body of one and the self-same man cannot be in some one time in diverse places, but must needs be in some one certain place ; therefore the body of Christ cannot be present at one time in many and diverse places. And because (as Holy Scripture doth teach) Christ was taken up into heaven, and there shall continue until the end of the world, a faithful man ought not either to believe or openly confess the real and bodily presence (as they term it) of Christ's flesh and blood in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper ". In its place, there was the simple statement, so familiar to us now, that " The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten in the Supper only after a heavenly and spiritual manner, and the mean whereby the body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is faith ".

Now, as we are aware, Anglo-Catholics have seized on this alteration to declare that the Eucharistic teaching of our present Article 28, as *a result* of this slight change, completely contradicts the eucharistic

[1] Report of Royal Commission (1906), p. 143.
[2] *Works*, I, p. 6.
[3] *Works*, Preface, p. 3.

teaching of Cranmer and the Edwardian Reformers, so that their teaching on the Lord's Supper cannot be regarded as appealed to now even as an *expositio contemporanea* of our formularies. They go even further, and assert that its language teaches " an objective presence in the elements in *virtue* of consecration, as something external to ourselves and in no way dependent on our feeling or perception of it and is not due to faith ". But it is surely impossible to reconcile the language of our Article 28 (" present only after a heavenly and spiritual manner, and only received by faith ") with an " objective presence in the elements ", " attached to the sign by virtue of the act of consecration and not consequent upon the act of communion ".[1] For this necessarily implies that " the wicked and such as are void of a lively faith " do, even if unprofitably, " eat the Body of Christ " ; and yet Archbishop Parker composed our Article 29 expressly to assert that *in nullo modo* are they partakers of Christ.[2]

The Elizabethan Reformers took particular care to repudiate this doctrine of the objective presence in the elements, which it is now alleged their Article 28 teaches. For they re-introduced the 1549 words of delivery (" The body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life "), while their next sentence distinguishes most clearly between the ' sign ' and that which it signified or symbolized. For if they held that there was a presence in the *elements*, their sentence should have read " Take and eat *it* ". But instead it is " Take and eat *this*, and feed on Him in thy *heart* by faith ", i.e. exactly the language of this altered Article 28 : " the mean by which the body is received is *faith* ". The ' Puritan ' or Middleburgh Prayer Book of 1584, although certainly not wishing to teach a real objective presence in the elements, is far less careful in its symbolical language ; for its words of administration are " Take and eat ; this bread *is* the Body of Christ which was broken for us " ; and in Baxter's Savoy Liturgy the words are, " Take ye, eat ye ; this *is* the body of Christ which was broken for you ". There is not a tittle of evidence to show that the Elizabethan Reformers taught, as Bishop Gibson asserts, " an objective presence external to ourselves " in the Eucharist and " independent of our Faith ", or that they differed in any way from Cranmer's teaching on the Lord's Supper.

Cranmer in his learned treatise on the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Lord's Supper had confuted Gardiner's claim that this ' objective presence ' in the elements had been taught by the Early Fathers ; and similarly Bishop Jewel affirmed in his famous ' Challenge ' at Paul's Cross, that not one " Catholic doctor or Father for the first six centuries " taught that Christ's body " is really, substantially, corporally, carnally or naturally in the Sacrament, or that His Body may be in a thousand places at once, or that the Sacrament should be worshipped, or that the priest had authority to offer up Christ to the Father ". " The bread," Jewel says, " is on the table, the body is in heaven. The bread is in the mouth, the body is in the heart ; the bread feedeth the body, the body feedeth the

[1] Gibson, *Articles*, II, p. 661 ; cf. Kidd, *Articles*, p. 229.
[2] Parker, *History of Revisions*, p. 77.

soul ".[1] And this doctrine of Jewel's, identical with Cranmer's, received the endorsement of the whole Convocation. The truth is that Parker and the Elizabethan Reformers, with the exception of Bishop Cheyney who was excommunicated, were in thorough accord with the eucharistic teaching of Cranmer and his brethren. Ridley had declared that " Christ made one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, neither can any man reiterate that Sacrifice of His, and yet is the Communion an acceptable sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving ".[2]

Parker in his Eleven Articles of 1561 strongly condemned the " doctrine which maintains the Mass to be a propitiatory Sacrifice for the quick and dead . . . as neither agreeable to Christ's ordinance, but most ungodly and injurious to the precious redemption of our Saviour Christ's only sufficient Sacrifice ".[3] Archbishop Sandys taught that " the spiritual part, that which feedeth the soul, only the faithful do receive. For he cannot be partaker of the body of Christ, who is no member of Christ's body ". " His body is *there*, therefore not *here*." " Here we have a *sacrament*, a sign, a memorial, a representation of the body and blood of Christ."[4]

The Elizabethan Book of Homilies (1562) contained one on ' The Worthy receiving of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ '. As an implied condemnation of the medieval custom of non-communicating attendance, it states that in the Lord's Supper " every one of us must be guests and not gazers, eaters and not lookers, ourselves partakers of this table, and not beholders of others " ; and in line with Cranmer's and Parker's teaching, it warns us " to take heed lest of the memory it be made a sacrifice, lest of a communion a private eating ". It also explains that because Christ " hath made on the Cross a full and sufficient sacrifice for thee " " thou needest no other sacrifice or oblation, no sacrificing priest, no mass ".[5] It is therefore difficult, or rather I would assert impossible, to discover in this Elizabethan eucharistic teaching in the 1562 Articles Dr. Kidd's " changes of the first magnitude "[6] from that of Cranmer's.

III

It would be well to mention here that our Reformers held no doctrine that the efficacy of the sacrament of Holy Communion was dependent on the ministration of an *episcopally* ordained man. Archbishop Grindal's license to Morison, a Scottish presbyterian minister, " to celebrate the divine offices and *minister the sacraments* throughout the whole Province of Canterbury ", is a sufficient evidence of this.[7] This is a very practical issue to-day, because if the Eucharist is subject to the exclusive control of the Anglican priesthood then at once the denial of intercommunion follows. But just as Cranmer and the Reformers exposed the falsity of Gardiner's appeal to the eucharistic teaching of the Early Fathers, so in the last century Deane Goode, and especially Dr. Harrison in his learned ' Answer ', refuted Dr. Pusey's

[1] *Works*, I, pp. 20, 21.
[2] *Works*, I, p. 298.
[3] Strype, *Annals*, I, p. 219.
[4] *Sermons*, p. 88.
[5] *Homilies* (1844), pp. 395-8.
[6] *Articles*, p. 227.
[7] Strype, *Grindal*, I, p. 402.

' Challenge '—that the Fathers held " a real objective Presence in the elements by virtue of consecration ". Dr. Harrison carefully analysed Dr. Pusey's long catena of quotations and showed that they rested on garbled extracts and serious suppressions and omissions, which completely misrepresented the teaching of the Fathers. For Pusey had ignored entirely the Fathers' explanations of ' signs ' and ' sacraments '—for instance, the practice of calling the sign by the name of what it signified. Augustine had warned his reader that " care must be taken lest thou understand figurative language literally " ; and he added : " It is miserable slavery of the mind " to " take signs for realities ". But this is exactly what Dr. Pusey had done. For instance, St. Augustine stated : " He who shall say the ' Rock ' was Christ, in proper signification, blasphemes " ; and the same charge would necessarily apply to the attempt to make the consecrated elements Christ's body " in proper signification ".[1] Dr. Harrison proved not only that the Fathers never used the word ' real presence ' but that they never held the doctrine of the real objective presence in the elements. Bishop Gardiner had claimed that the Consecration Prayer of the First Prayer Book (1549) really taught transubstantiation. Cranmer indignantly denied the assertion. " The bread and wine," he declared, " be made unto us the body and blood of Christ, not by changing the substance of Christ's natural body and blood, but that in the godly *using of them* they may be unto the receivers Christ's body and blood ". " We do not," he explained, " pray absolutely that the bread and wine may be made the body and blood of Christ, but that unto us in that holy mystery they may be so ".[2] But this sinister attempt to ' mis-take ' and twist the language of the 1549 Book led the Reformers to make the 1552 Communion Service and Consecration Prayer quite unequivocal in its phraseology. The Consecration Prayer was changed into the form " that we, receiving these Thy creatures of bread and wine . . . may be partakers of His most blessed body and blood " ; while in the post-Communion Thanksgiving the language is changed into " that Thou dost vouchsafe to feed us who have *duly received* these holy mysteries ", instead of in 1549, " Thou dost vouchsafe to feed us *in these* holy mysteries ".

We should bear in mind here the important change which Cranmer made in 1552 when he removed what is often called the ' Prayer of Oblation ' entirely from the 1549 long Consecration Prayer, and placed it merely as an *alternative* prayer *after* the administration, so that it could no longer be regarded as a ' prayer of sacramental oblation '. Consequently the words in this prayer, " this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving ", cannot now be referred to the elements of bread and wine. We often hear the term ' eucharistic sacrifice ', and so we should remember that this prayer contains the only eucharistic sacrifice which we offer in the Lord's Supper, i.e. of " ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice ". A modern practice of ceremonially presenting and ' offering ' the bread and wine for Communion at the commencement of the service was definitely rejected at the 1662 revision, and instead the rubric simply orders,

[1] Harrison, *The Fathers versus Dr. Pusey*, p. 114.
[2] *The Lord's Supper*, p. 79.

" Then shall the priest place upon the Table so much bread and wine as he shall think sufficient ".

We should remember that Cranmer had found his way only *gradually* to right Scriptural teaching on the Lord's Supper. He said in 1548 at the great Parliamentary debate on the Eucharist, that previously he was in that " error of the Real Presence and of Transubstantiation ", but that " after it pleased God to shew unto me by His holy Word a more perfect knowledge of His Son Jesus Christ by little and little I put away my former ignorance ".[1] And so in this burning controversy over the Lord's Supper, he declared that " the most sure and plain way is to cleave unto holy Scripture ".[2] He appealed certainly, in confirmation of his eucharistic teaching, to the ' orthodox Fathers ', because Gardiner had claimed their support for his teaching. But Cranmer would not allow the holy Scriptures to be interpreted by their decisions, since he affirmed that the holy Scriptures " ought to be to us both the rules and judges of all Christian doctrine ".[3]

IV

It is well here to clear up a common misapprehension, to the effect that Cranmer repudiated what are *mis-termed* the ' Zwinglian ' views of the Continental Reformers on the Eucharist. Cranmer had insisted that " the bread and wine be not vain or bare tokens ", but that " in the due ministration of the Sacrament God is present ", and *Zwingli* had equally denied that the elements were " bare signs and figures ". " We believe that Christ is truly in the Supper . . . we eat here spiritually what exists in heaven naturally . . . a true body is eaten in spirit, mind and soul ".[4] " He commands us to eat ", said Zwingli, " *before* He says it is His body . . . for *this* cause, that it is only His body *where it is eaten*, and by faith we eat, that we may receive in us the body and blood of Christ ; and unless we do eat, it is *bread*, which we keep for the use of the Eucharist ".[5] This not only agrees with Cranmer's teaching, that to those " worthily eating and drinking the bread and wine, He is spiritually present " ; or as Article XXV puts it, " And in such only as worthily receive the same they have a wholesome effect or operation " ; it is also exactly Hooker's view when he says, " I see not which way it should be gathered by the words of Christ when and where the bread is His body or the cup His blood, but only in the very heart and soul of him which receiveth them ".[6] Hooper was correct, therefore, when he informed Bullinger that Cranmer " entertains right views as to the nature of Christ's presence in the Supper ; his sentiments are pure and similar to yours in Switzerland ".[7] Those therefore who interpret our Lord's words in a *merely* figurative sense and regard the elements as " bare and naked signs " are not Zwinglians but Socinians.

To sum up shortly, the eucharistic doctrine of our Reformers was the positive one of a real spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, such as is so clearly taught in our Article 28. And Cranmer was

[1] *Works*, I, p. 374.
[2] *The Lord's Supper*, pp. 23, 24.
[3] *Reformatio. Legum*, Tit. i, c. 15.
[4] *English Church and the Reformation*, p. 156.
[5] Harrison, op. cit., p. xvi.
[6] *Ecc. Pol.*, V, p. 67.
[7] *Original Letters*, pp. 71, 2.

certainly correct in stating that it was the Roman doctrine of " the real presence of Christ's flesh and blood in the Sacrament, and the sacrifice of Christ made by the priest ", which overthrows the Scriptural teaching ; and as Parker said, it " is most ungodly and most injurious to Christ's one sufficient sacrifice ".[1] For the real objective presence in the elements logically involves (as the catechism *Faith and Practice* recently published by the S.P.C.K. blatantly instructs our Church day-school children) that " the priest's first duty is to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass ". In this way the manual affirms that " the Church offers to God the Father the sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ . . . to obtain mercy for the living and the departed ". On the basis of this false doctrine of the real objective presence, the children are also taught that " the consecrated elements are the sacred body and blood of Christ ", and so must be adored, especially when " reserved in the Tabernacle "[2]—in spite of the express condemnation of this ' idolatry ' by our so-called Black Rubric. We cannot but endorse Bishop Burnet's language when he declares that it is " gross idolatry when an insensible piece of matter is believed to be God and in all respects worshipped with the same adoration that is offered to Almighty God ".[3] As Canon VII of 1640 asserts, this " is the idolatry committed in the Mass ".

Thus in our own time, as Cranmer prophesied, " the Lord's vineyard " is once again covered with " the old errors and superstitions ". I believe that our best, if not our only, antidote for combating this disloyal and delusive teaching in our Church is more constant zeal and more faithful teaching of Scriptural truth. It is only by this means that we can hope to retain in our Church the true Catholic teaching which our Reformers restored with such fearlessness and faithfulness. For we must not forget that the safeguarding of truth demands not only eternal vigilance but also constant diligence.

[1] Cf. Carter, *The Anglican Via Media*, p. 72.
[2] *Faith and Practice* (S.P.C.K.), pp. 67, 94, 240.
[3] *Articles*, p. 453.