

Covid 19, the Church and Holy Communion - 15 Theses: United and Reformed



The Revd Dr John P Bradbury, 10th April 2020

The news that the country was to go into lockdown and that churches would not be able to meet for public worship has led to an extraordinary transformation of our worshipping life in a very short space of time.

As it became clear that many members of the URC would not be able to attend church for many weeks (before, even, the full lockdown was announced) a few of us in informal Facebook chat thought it would be helpful if the Daily Devotions series might be extended so that on Sundays a full act of worship could be offered.

This, through remarkable efforts of many people, has become available on email and in audio form and in a form for printing and posting for congregations where many might not be on the internet. In a conversation about whether something 'Eucharistic' might be offered on Easter Sunday, I found myself agreeing to attempt to craft something.

What has resulted is a liturgy that is a recording of a communion service celebrated with just three people, socially distanced, in a large church building; a text for people to follow, inviting them to share in some of the Eucharistic prayers with us, and a text version that can be posted out for folk to use on their own at home.

I invite people, if they wish, to take bread and wine – alternatively, the prayers are so crafted such that by dropping two specific references to 'bread and wine', they make a eucharistic style meal grace that might be used at an Easter meal table.

I've been struck that many people in the URC in varying ways have instinctively wanted to find ways in which communion might be celebrated. I find this interesting, as we are not a tradition in which many would instinctively describe their spirituality as 'Eucharistic'. Unlike our sisters and brothers in other traditions, we tend not to have a weekly (with exceptions, but certainly not a daily!) celebrations of Holy Communion.

We are known as a tradition of 'The Word'. And yet – there is something which has come to the fore in many of the people of the URC in this very strange time about the felt need for Communion to be celebrated.

This paper is an attempt to work out in a form longer and more detailed than a Facebook posting, and shorter and less formalised than an academic paper, some of what might lie in our tradition which accounts for what, to some of our ecumenical colleagues, looks a little hair-raising.

It is not a fully worked through systematic account of what is going on. It is an attempt to point to some key aspects of our theology and practice which help illuminate what is happening when we post to someone a piece of paper which invites them to pray and take

bread and wine, or for people at different times to listen to a recording of a communion service, join in some of the prayers, and take bread and wine.

What I say here I do so entirely in my personal capacity. I'll refer to the theology and practice of the reformation traditions, and to the faith and order of the United Reformed Church, but what I'm saying here I do so only as a minister who has found himself doing something remarkably odd, trying to think through what might be going on.

It hopefully offers some rationale for those who might be looking for a reflection as to what is going on in the Easter Sunday Daily Devotions act of worship or who are asking related questions more generally.

What it is not is any kind of statement of the conviction of the United Reformed Church. That could only be defined by the General Assembly. It is tentative and comes with an invitation to dialogue about what I say here, from both within the United Reformed Church and with ecumenical friends.

All that I say is framed by what the United Reformed Church confesses about the Lord's Supper. We confess remarkably little (this is one of our tendencies – to say less about such things rather than more), but all we do say I take as a given:

The United Reformed Church celebrates the gospel sacrament of the Lord's Supper. When in obedience to the Lord's command his people show forth his sacrifice on the cross by the bread broken and the wine poured for them to eat and drink, he himself, risen and ascended, is present and gives himself to them for their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace.

United with him and with the whole Church on earth and in heaven, his people gathered at his table present their sacrifice of thanksgiving and renew the offering of themselves and rejoice in the promise of his coming in glory.

Thesis 1

The nourishment we receive in Holy Communion is the work of the triune God: the Holy Spirit unites us with Christ such that through receiving bread and wine we are nourished and grow in grace.

It is foundational to the Reformation traditions that first and foremost, what is going on in Holy Communion that is of substantial benefit to us is the work of God, not the work of the Church. We break bread and pour wine, gather at the table, present a sacrifice of thanksgiving, offer ourselves and rejoice in God's coming in glory, but Christ gives himself for our nourishment. The benefits of Holy Communion come through the work of God, not through the work of the Church.

Thesis 2

The Church is fallen.

The Reformation traditions have always been clear that the Church itself is a fallen and broken reality, it is a redeemed sinner – but sinner, nonetheless. It is Christ's body, and God's instrument of grace in the world, but as a human institution it is fallen and sinful. The church can and does err. We more readily reach for this language than our Catholic

friends, for whom the hierarchy and institutions of the church have an infallibility because they are the body of Christ (whilst for them individual members of the hierarchy are fallen and sinful, the institution itself is not).

Thesis 3

Any celebration of Holy Communion by the Church is fallen.

It might sound very odd that something which is primarily the work of God can be fallen. But by this I mean that the work of the church in celebrating Holy Communion is always fallen. This is perhaps most visible in the disunity of the Church – that we cannot all gather around the one table in ecumenical fellowship is a sign of the deep brokenness of any celebration of the Eucharist.

Even our Catholic friends might speak of something which is full and complete in itself, yet still in some ways less than it might be because there is separation of the baptised. Also, our human celebration of the rite itself is fallen. I have been to some dreadful services of Holy Communion, where things that are really basic have not been present (invocation of the Spirit, for example, or any remembrance of Christ's death and resurrection).

Thesis 4

That which is fallen is, through the work of the Spirit, a means of grace.

Holy Communion is never 'valid' because we get it right, it is grace-filled because of the work of the Holy Spirit. When I sit through an act of worship that makes me cringe, and that by most theological or liturgical standards is seriously lacking, it is still an event through which God's Spirit can and does work. We might be ecumenically divided, and our celebrations of the Eucharist less than they should be because of that – but they are still vehicles of God's grace.

Thesis 5

Holy Communion is an act in which the triune God unites the Church across space and time

Communion is a showing forth of the once for all sacrifice of Christ upon the cross. That which is an event in the past, is made present as we recall it to mind. In the Sanctus we recognise that in Communion we unite our prayers with all God's faithful people of all times and places. The work of the Holy Spirit is beyond time and space.

Thesis 6

The faith and practice of the Church is always to some extent provisional and contextual.

In the Reformed Tradition, we have always found the need to keep articulating anew the faith of the Church in new times and places. Confessions of faith abound. In the United Reformed Church, we reserve the right for the General Assembly to alter our confession of faith when obedience to the Holy Spirit and the Word of God require us to. What might be faithful in one situation, in a different situation may be lacking. We also tend to use the

word 'normally' a lot. Rather than write detailed sets of rules for every situation (as might the instincts be of some of our ecumenical sisters and brothers) we tend to define what is 'normal' and allow the immediate context to determine when it should be discerned that we depart from 'normal'.

Thesis 7

In the United Reformed Church, the question of presidency at the sacraments is one of Church order, not validity.

The parallel statement about the Eucharist in the Roman Catholic tradition to the one quoted above might state that 'when a priest shows forth Christ's sacrifice on the cross by taking bread and wine', the benefits of the Eucharist are conferred. For us it is the people of God as a whole doing this that is significant.

The question of who presides is a serious and important one, and only ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament may normally do so. However, in situations of pastoral deprivation, we rejoice in the fact that Synods may authorise Lay People (usually ordained Elders or Commissioned Lay Preachers) to preside.

In the (hopefully rare...but perhaps not...) situation where someone presides without authorisation, that might be a problem of Church Order, but it is unlikely that the General Assembly would rule that that alone would make the celebration invalid (not that our Assembly tends to ever make that kind of ruling!).

Thesis 8

The United Reformed Church tends to prioritise inclusion in the sacramental life of the Church over strict adherence to a defined Church Order.

This manifests itself in varying ways. We tend not to restrict receiving Communion to those who are regular communicating members of their churches. In some places we don't restrict Communion to the baptised.

We have always tended to use elements and means of distribution that mean participation can be as wide as possible (for example, the combination of temperance, use of non-alcoholic wine and hygiene mean we tended to adopt individual communion glasses over the symbolism of the common cup, and many churches might have an array of elements to ensure those with allergies can be accommodated). We prefer lay presidency to Eucharistic deprivation.

Thesis 9

Holy Communion is always the act of the gathered people of God. In the Reformed Tradition it is not normally understood to be a vicarious act.

Those presiding at Holy Communion do not do so on behalf of others – it is always an act of all those participating. In some traditions, clergy or members of religious orders offer the worship of the church on behalf of the wider church. A priest might preside at the sacrifice of the Mass and represent the people at worship.

The United Reformed Church does not understand worship to be representative in this sense. Our congregations are not Parish Churches that in some sense worship on behalf of the whole Parish whether the folk in the Parish recognise (or even wish!) it or not. Equally, we never celebrate Holy Communion with an 'intention'.

Holy Communion is not, in our understanding, an intercessory act in and of itself (even though it may have elements of intercession within the liturgy). We may understand ourselves as exercising a collective priesthood in the midst of the world as bearers of the gospel but we would tend to view sacraments as those things which nourish us for the exercise of that collective ministry, not as something we do on behalf of those not present.

Thesis 10

The Church is the people, not its buildings.

This would be fairly self-evidently understood, and is the case for all Christian traditions, even those for whom specific buildings are of the utmost importance. Our buildings may represent the people of the church as the places in which they normally gather.

Thesis 11

The Church is known to be present where the Word is proclaimed and the Sacraments duly celebrated.

This is a classic articulation of the Reformation traditions, rather than one the United Reformed Church specifically has made its own. However, my observation would be the tendency to presume this lies deep within us. The Church is the whole people of God (it is not its hierarchy, church structures being secondary and mutable elements in the life of the church), and the church is known where the Word is proclaimed and Baptism and the Lord's Supper celebrated.

Classically, we would say that the Church gathers to hear the Word and celebrate the sacraments. It is interesting that the question does not arise about whether the ministry of the Word can be conducted when the Church cannot gather, but that the question arises in such a significant way when thinking of the sacramental life of the Church.

Thesis 12

In the Reformed Tradition accounts of the way in which we feed on Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion concern the work of the Holy Spirit, not accounts of physical change in the bread and the wine.

Here I am following Calvin quite closely, for whom we do indeed really feed on the body and blood of Christ in Communion, but do so because the Holy Spirit raises us to be nourished by Christ as he is seated in glory in heaven. Calvin wishes to hold to the real presence of Christ in the sacrament, but not to accounts of physical change in the elements.

Thesis 13

The United Reformed Church tends to prioritise the local as the place where decisions about the appropriate exercise of worship happen, and its ministers have authority to conduct their ministries, along with Elders and Church meetings, as they discern is right.

How Holy Communion is celebrated, and who is invited to the table are decisions we tend to leave to the local and resist defining at the level of the General Assembly or the Synod. Similarly, ministers exercise their ministry in the local context under their own authority, rather than an authority derived from a bishop or a wider church body (though under the oversight of the wider church). Hence, URC ministers have a teaching and sacramental ministry in their own right that Anglican or Catholic priests have in a derived form from their bishops.

Thesis 14

The situation pertaining regarding Covid 19 is truly extraordinary

Nothing in the history of the church has been experienced like this before. Where the Church has been (and is) persecuted, it has been unable to meet, or met in situations of danger defying orders not to. In the 13th century in England public worship ceased at the instigation of the church in a political feud over the appointment of an Archbishop of Canterbury.

In times of war, churches were at moments unable to meet due to bombing – but not universally so. For the Church not to be able to gather for public worship, and to be in full agreement with the government that it is genuinely in for the common good that we do not, is a truly unique situation.

Thesis 15

Extraordinary times are not moments when what is normal in terms of faith and order should be defined.

Put very simply, what we determine to do in abnormal times and as an exception to normal practice, must not define what we do in normal times. Our preference for provisional and contextual approaches allows deviation from the norm but should not then automatically determine a new norm without proper reference to the processes of discernment of the Councils of the Church.

What is going on in Holy Communion during the Covid-19 crisis?

In terms of what is going on in the resources for worship, recorded and in printed form, for Easter Sunday from the Daily Devotions, let me hazard a response based on the above. Firstly, it is less than a celebration of Holy Communion should be, because we cannot gather as a community in one place and time and share one loaf and one cup.

But God uses that which is less than perfect as instruments of grace through the work of the Holy Spirit in any celebration of Holy Communion. It is an attempt at a collective act of

worship. People will either listen to, or read at home, the same words, offered by an ordained minister of Word and Sacraments of the United Reformed Church.

They are invited to pray, with me, certain key parts of the prayers. Where people are taking bread and wine themselves, that there is an immediacy of presence of those prayers seems right and proper, as does the fact that they are prayers written and offered by someone who is ordinarily authorised to preside at the sacraments and prayers being shared on the same day with thousands of others. Is it a household act of Holy Communion and lay presidency?

Not quite – there is a collective intent and act of ordained ministry at work. Is the fact that the sacrament is not made valid by virtue of the ordained status of the president helpful to us in this strange practice? Yes – certainly.

It is also an expression of our tendency to prioritise inclusion in the sacramental life over strict adherence to Church order – hence whilst a live streamed act of worship might in some ways be preferable, because it excludes many of our folk who have no access to the internet, we've opted for something more accessible, if in some ways less ideal.

Where people do take bread and wine, and pray prayers along with the audio version, or using words they read from a piece of paper on their own (though the same words that thousands of others around the United Reformed Church will head and pray this Easter Sunday) is it a valid celebration of communion?

Here, I would suggest that the theses above reframe somewhat the question of 'valid' in ways slightly different to other Christian traditions. Holy Communion is Holy Communion when the Spirit moves. The Church acts as faithfully as it can, and we trust the graciousness of God to nourish us through uniting us with Christ as we take bread and wine.

I believe we are acting as faithfully as we can in the present context given that we understand that the Church has not ceased to be the Church because it cannot meet, and that the Church is where the Word is proclaimed and the Sacraments duly celebrated.

We can't gather to hear the Word, and yet we continue to respond to the call to proclaim and hear the Word, and similarly, it is appropriate to continue to celebrate the Sacrament in response to Christ's command too.

Other approaches to the current situation are of course possible within our tradition. Recognising the temporary nature of the situation makes a 'fast' from Holy Communion entirely possible.

The theological convictions of other traditions allow for vicarious celebrations of the sacraments on behalf of the faithful who cannot be present. That would stretch our understanding too far, I fear.

I hope the theses above help articulate why, in our tradition, some of how we are responding is possible. We must be ecumenically sensitive to the reality that it is not understood as possible by many sisters and brothers, and we would be wise not to make universal claims to our theological convictions. I believe that responding to articulated pastoral need to receive communion, is, in our tradition, possible.