Our God has no Favorites: A liberation Theology of the Eucharist

Jason John
Due 190894

1630 word critical review
Topic: THEO 3310, Sacraments
Lecturer: Andrew Dutney

Abstract

Primevesi & Henderson argue that since God's love- as reflected in Jesus' ministry and the witness of the Holy Spirit- is indiscriminate, the various church denominations must cease discriminating against one another at the Eucharist. That is, regardless of theological differences, all denominations must be willing to preside at, and receive at, the Eucharist held in every other denomination.

This paper shows that their arguments lead to the further, unstated, conclusion that just as all denominations should be welcome at the Lord's table, so should all people. The authors themselves deny this conclusion, but their reasons for doing so rest on too narrow a consideration of the biblical witnesses, the construction of an inaccurate parallel between Jesus' culture and ours, and a failure to consider the practical impossibility of their proposal.

Introduction

The authors begin by defending their claim to be writing a liberation theology, even though it does not address issues of liberation from material poverty or oppression. Their defense is based on the assertion that all people are hungry for and in need of the Eucharist (p. 11). A second defense is that both clergy and laity alike experience oppression because of the doctrinal laws which unjustly deny the Eucharist to other denominations. In addition the laity (and in their case all women) are unjustly prevented from administering it.

Although their point is well made, it emphasises their Anglican and Catholic backgrounds and audience. I can readily imagine that denominations

practicing closed communion would find this book challenging and controversial[1] . As a member of a denomination who welcomes, "Those who love the Lord a little, and would like to love him more," I found that far from being challenging, the book failed to go far enough.

The book's two major shortcomings in part arise from the authors' narrow reading of Scripture. They have taken verses and stories which support their argument whilst ignoring a large body of material that contradicts it. For the first issue I will address, this is not a major problem, and they could easily have dealt with it in a paragraph or two. The second issue is, however, of fundamental importance and represents a major oversight on the part of the authors.

1) God's indiscriminate love

The authors often assert that God's love is indiscriminate[2] . The New Testament, and particularly Jesus' table fellowship with 'sinners' is taken as evidence of this. While it is certainly true that Jesus refused to discriminate between people on the basis of their sex, class, occupation or (eventually) race, he is recorded in all gospels as representing a fundamentally discriminatory God. This is followed up in other passages of the New Testament, so that the overall witness is to a God who is extremely discriminate in choosing who to reach out to and include. Neo-Calvinists have plenty of evidence in the New Testament of a predestining God. The difference between God and us is not represented as being that we discriminate and God doesn't, but that we discriminate on various visible qualities, whereas God apparently has no logical basis other than that he will have mercy on whom he will have mercy[3] . Try telling Esau that God is non-discriminatory: at least the tax collectors could change their profession!

The narrowness of the authors' biblical survey does not detract from their

---

[1] Northcott called it a "radical reappraisal of the Eucharistic meal". Northcott, M. 264'.36 in *Theological Book Review* vol 2, (Feed the Minds 1990).

[2] e.g. pp 15, 23, 28, 34, 45, 59, 64 etc.

[3] A few examples of God's discriminatory nature are found in Mt 11:25-27, Mk 4:10-12, Lk 10:21-22, Jn 6:65, Ro chs 9-11

main point, that God does not discriminate along the same lines that we do, and that we cannot validly exclude other Christians from our Eucharistic celebrations. Unfortunately, however, the authors' themselves end up advocating Eucharistic discrimination along new lines. The boundary shifts from a denominational one, to one between those inside and outside the church. Those who already have faith in Jesus are welcome, those without such faith must be excluded.

2) Communion for all *Christians*

This paper challenges the authors' refusal of communion to non Christians on two grounds. First, their narrow use of Scripture and the inaccurate parallel they extract from it; Second, the logical impossibility of such a situation, even were it desirable.

The authors make several inaccurate claims about Jesus:

> "the only *condition* for a saving encounter with his body is *faith* in the love which draws us to him" (p. 80, italics mine).
>
> "the *necessity for belief* can be observed in *all the reactions* to Jesus recorded in the gospels" (p. 81, italics mine).
>
> "those who touched Jesus with faith were saved or healed, and those without faith were damned" (p. 90).

These statements rely heavily on the stories of the woman at the well, and a comparison between the woman with continual bleeding and Judas. What they forget was that it was Jesus who approached the woman at the well, and the bleeding woman most likely had only the barest faith in Jesus, probably as no more than someone rumored to be able to heal. Judas, quite possibly, had much more 'faith' in Jesus, but suffered from impatience[4] . The New Testament is full of stories of Jesus approaching, and even healing people who had absolutely no faith in him beforehand whatsoever. Often it is Jesus' action, his self offering, that leads to their embryonic faith[5] . The authors themselves

[4] The burden of proof is with the authors. So it is, and I tend to agree with you.

[5] A very quick skim through the gospels reveals that all gospels have several of these stories: Mt 8:28ff, 9:2ff, 8:14ff; Mk 2:13ff, 3:1ff' Lk 7:1ff; Jn chs 4 & 5.

mention the parable of the great banquet, where people are *compelled* to come in, but apparently fail to see its implications. Zaccheus, whom the authors also mention, was merely "trying to see who Jesus was" (Lk 19:3) when Jesus made him not only recipient, but *host* of the meal! The same happened with Levi (Lk 5:27ff), who is not recorded as having any initial interest in Jesus at all.

Jesus, as recorded in the New Testament, did not demand that people had faith in him before he invited them to share a meal with him, or made his healing power available to them. As often as not, their attitude toward him was a response, not a precondition. If we follow the authors in aligning the Eucharist with the meals which Jesus shared with others[6] , we should conclude that communion be open to all, and that we should actively invite people to the Eucharist, wherever they are, not just wait for them to walk through our church doors[7] .

The authors are also incorrect because they draw the wrong parallel between the first century and today. Jesus' inclusion of the 'tax collector and sinners' is not equivalent to the Catholics accepting the Anglicans or *vice versa*. That would be the case if an Essene from Qumran had dined with Sadducees, Pharisees and Zealots (that is, other groups with the same basic faith in God but which refuse to accept each others' doctrines and ministries). The 'sinners' were outside the covenant and faith community as the religious people of the day saw it. A proper parallel would be the church's invitation to non Christians to share in communion. It need not be seen as a validation of their lifestyle or beliefs, but as a proclamation of our belief that Christ lived and died for all, and our invitation for others to in some way receive the grace of God through the meal. The higher our view of communion, and thus the closer we link it with Jesus and the activity of the Spirit, the less exclusive we should dare to be in administering it.

Finally, the authors' proposal that communion be open to Christians only is practically impossible, and leaves us no better off than the Catholics are at

---

6 p. 35. This is not a new proposal (e.g. Perrin, N. *Rediscovering the teaching of Jesus* (SCM 1967) pp. 104-5. etc ...

7 But here I preempt my essay! (I heard that Wesley used to consider the Eucharist as an evangelical tool, but I haven't been able to verify this). Ask Arnold Hunt.

present. All it means is that there are slightly less people to exclude. How would the poor minister judge whether a communicant had enough faith? How hard must we "try to harbor no evil thoughts, fornication... (p. 90)." The focus shifts back onto some property of the communicant, the very thing the rest of the book tried to move away from.

The beginnings of the problems inherent in this approach are seen in pp 90ff, where the validity of the communion rests on the heart of the people, so that if nobody has the right attitude it isn't really communion. What if only one person has the right attitude? Is a 50% majority sufficient for the *epiclesis* to work?

If one holds a high view of the elements, they are what they are regardless of our attitude to them, and so we should invite non believers to share in them just as Jesus shared with non believers and so began the church. If one holds a low view, then communion only has meaning to the individual as far as it reminds them of their place in the church, and the life of Jesus. In this case, what harm can inviting non-believers do? At least they'll hear a bit of the gospel and have a few minutes to 'chew it over'.

Conclusion

Primavesi and Henderson challenge their denominations to open their communion tables to all Christians on the basis of the relationship between Jesus' ministry on earth and the Eucharist. Given the doctrine of the Catholic and Anglican churches, theirs is a radical proposal and no doubt very challenging.

Unfortunately, the book fails to give fair weight to all aspects of Jesus' ministry, and therefore fails to reach the more logical conclusion that communion should be open to, and offered to, everybody.

<u>References</u>

Northcott, M. 264'.36 *Theological Book Review* vol. 2 (Feed the Minds 1990).

Perrin, N. *Rediscovering the teaching of Jesus* (SCM 1967). Cited, not seen, in Dutney, A., *Food, Sex and Death.* *A personal account of Christianity* (Joint Board of Christian Education 1993) p. 76.

Primavesi, A. & Henderson, J. *Our God has no favorites. A liberation theology of the Eucharist.* (Burns & Oates 1989).

HD

Thanks for your paper, [illegible]. It is imaginative, well constructed, clearly written and carefully argued. You have been able to keep in view the strengths of the book even as you have challenged its inconsistencies and inaccuracies. Your radicalisation of these themes is very suggestive. I'm really looking forward to your essay. I think you'll find Nudge The sense of people providing some support for you, along with Schillebeeckx Church: The human story of God. Hodgson Revisioning the church would provide some alternative consideration, especially with his discussion of the difference between basileia (inclusive) and ekklesia (distinctive). It seems to me that a lot hinges on the definition of "the sinners" both in the NT and today. If the 'sinners' are the 'unbelievers' (and you wouldn't [illegible] are that in some circles) and the eucharist is to reflect Jesus' meal practice (in terms of the type of people present) and Jesus' [illegible] with 'the sinners', then the table has to be open/prepared for 'unbelievers'. The propositions leading to that conclusion must be carefully examined. Also the propositions being considered may distract attention from some other that are equally important.

262.7 N944   260 S334c   262 H691

Anyway, thanks for a stimulating paper

[illegible]