

The Rice Cake We Break: Rethinking the Traditional Use of Bread and Wine for the Eucharistic Meal in Light of Cross-Cultural Contexts

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At the end of the 20th century, prominent Anglican Church leaders gathered to determine whether or not non-Western Anglican churches would be permitted to substitute the traditional bread and wine for other, more culturally appropriate food and drink during their regular Eucharistic meals. Because of the abuse suffered by many non-Western countries in the last several centuries, foods like bread and wine—which were once simply everyday staples to a first century Jewish community—have become synonymous with European and North American culture and often raise unpleasant connotations of colonialism, racism and oppression for non-white Christians. However, despite agreeing that Eucharistic substitutions are acceptable and even preferable in many cross-cultural contexts, the Anglican Church at large has still failed to express this sentiment in their statement of doctrinal beliefs—a move that I argue would lead to more established unity in the Church at large and a better representation of Christ’s original mandate to remember Him in the daily acts of eating and drinking together.

The Lord’s Supper is perhaps one of the most widely practiced and recognized traditions of the Christian faith, uniting believers of varying denominations, socioeconomic statuses, and cultural backgrounds from around the globe (SC). The traditional Eucharistic meal, first demonstrated by Jesus Christ on the night before His crucifixion and death, set up an example of communal remembrance through the breaking of bread and drinking of wine that has characterized Christian church tradition for the past two thousand years (SQ). Matthew 26:17-30 provides an eyewitness account of the original Lord’s

Supper, sharing that “As they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke *it*, and gave *it* to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body.’ Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave *it* to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.’ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (New King James Version). In a similar manner, the Christian tradition of churches

observing the Lord's Supper on a regular basis has almost exclusively been characterized by the sharing of bread or crackers and wine or grape juice. In the days of the early church leaders and theologians, the primary controversies surrounding the Lord's Supper were centered on the issues of transubstantiation¹ and the use of leavened versus unleavened bread. Theologians debated whether or not to use thin wafers or thick, spongy bread and many, like the great Protestant theologian John Calvin, decided that "whether the bread is leavened or unleavened; the wine red or white—it makes no difference. These things are indifferent, and left at the church's discretion" (Calvin, 167).

However, in the past two decades, church leaders of the Anglican faith have called for a reevaluation of the traditional Eucharistic meal in favor of practices that would better serve a cross-cultural Gospel mission (DC). In 2002, Paul Gibson of the Inter-Anglican Liturgical Commission sent out a letter with a survey attached to all Provincial Secretaries of the Anglican Church at large (IALC Report on Elements Used in Communion, 1). The survey was compiled after a series of IALC meetings in the late 1990's and early 2000's and brought up an important and, until then, rarely discussed question regarding Eucharistic tradition: is it, in our day and age, appropriate for non-Western churches to substitute the bread and wine of the Eucharistic meal into other forms of food and drink that would be more suitable for their cultural contexts? The questionnaire asked Anglican leaders across the globe whether questions of substitution of bread and wine had ever arisen in their diasporas, and under what situations they had permitted a substitution. According to the IALC's report, seven leaders responded that the question of substitution had arisen, while ten admitted that they had permitted substitution under circumstances of allergies, cost, concern for alcoholics, and other personal desires (CB). In addition, the report stated that the biggest factor for non-Western Anglican leaders to embrace Eucharistic substitution seemed to be cultural adaptation, stating: "For some Anglicans their local culture reads very different meanings into

bread and wine as these are 'foreign' imports. Other elements from the local culture convey the notion of celebratory meal far more than bread and wine" (IALC, 2). However, despite growing recognition of the use of Eucharistic substitutes among Anglican scholars, the Anglican Church as a whole still promotes the use of traditional bread and wine in their doctrinal statements, even going so far as to state on their website that Holy Communion is "a shared 'meal' of bread/wafer and wine". It seems that, despite growing explorations of Eucharistic substitutes opening new possibilities for a twenty-first century interpretation of Christ's example at the Last Supper, many Anglican leaders are still hesitant to advocate for an official change of policy to be published in regards to Holy Communion. After centuries of Western domination in the Christian faith, it may be time for the Anglican Church to publically accept an expression of the Eucharistic meal that reflects the customs of a myriad of cultures—a sentiment that would best be exemplified through the substitution of bread and wine for more culturally significant food and drink in order to bring about renewed communal unity in the Church at large (C). In the future, other Protestant and even Catholic denominations may follow suit and raise these issues within their own contexts. In fact, there are several non-Anglican scholars who have debated the issue of substitution and are quoted in the pages to follow. However, Anglican leaders have devoted more time and attention to the specific topic at hand than other Protestant denominations, which is why the Anglican Church in particular may soon be ready to publically defend the use of Eucharistic substitutions in non-Western cultural contexts.

In order to understand why cultural context within the Eucharistic meal matters, it is important to note that liturgy at its core is meant to promote unity and community within the church (R). According to William Seth Adams, Professor of Liturgies and Anglican Studies at Austin's Episcopal Seminary, liturgical events are defined by four significant aspects: "(1) the texts of the liturgy, both ritual texts and rubrics; (2) ritual action, 'the work of the ritual

¹The doctrine, primarily supported by the Roman Catholic Church and some Eastern Orthodox churches, that the Eucharistic elements at their consecration become the (literal) body and blood of Christ while keeping only the appearances of bread and wine (Miriam-Webster, 2017)

community which accompanies, animates and accomplishes the texts' (3) the environment 'within which the action takes place, the setting, the things used'; and (4) the interpretive framework" (Meyers, 1). In unpacking an analysis of the early church's traditional use of bread and wine, Phillip Tovey of the University of Oxford points out that in the original Lord's Supper, Jesus most likely used unleavened bread since the night of the meal fell during Passover, a period in which Jews were commanded not to eat leavened bread. However, Tovey also states that many have argued that by the time of the apostles Christians had already switched from unleavened to leavened bread. Even today, many churches use wafers instead of loaves, although neither authentically replicates the meal Christ instituted for His followers the night before His death—proving that for centuries now Eucharistic substitutes have already been implemented by the Western Church at large (Tovey, 44-45).

However, although substitutes have already been used by the Church for years, many theologians still claim that veering from the traditional single loaf of bread is in complete opposition to Christ's original mandate—an argument that may account for why the Anglican Church still resists formally accepting the doctrine of Eucharistic substitution in its doctrinal statement. In 1 Corinthians 10:17, Paul writes: "For we, *though* many, are one bread *and* one body; for we all partake of that one bread" (NJKV). University of Nottingham's Thomas O'Loughlin argues that "the shape of the whole loaf is crucial. A loaf is the result of the transformation of hundreds of grains of incredible wheat into a single wonderful reality: a loaf of bread. The loaf is the metaphor for the community—scattered Israel is gathered, transformed, and made one in Christ... The whole notion of gathering, being united in Christ, transformed through discipleship, and then having a share in the life of Christ is made completely invisible when we use pre-cut 'bite-sized' wafers" (O'Loughlin, 413-414). In a similar way, O'Loughlin's argument could be applied to the notion of substituting the bread for other food items and thereby destroying the concept of unity inherent in Christ's original decision. However, if the loaf is indeed the metaphor for the community, then the concept of Eucharistic

substitution does not need to oppose the sentiment behind O'Loughlin and others' argument. In many cases, using other locally-grown food instead of bread may actually better emphasize the need for community unity and signify the "oneness" Christ was demonstrating through the single loaf. The Kanamai Consultation of 1993 led many African Anglican leaders to not only encourage local believers to grow their own bread, but to "consider whether they should permit the use of local staple foods and drinks for the Eucharistic elements, also carefully considering this alongside biblical tradition" (Meyers, 90) Ruth Meyers goes on to suggest that "when the Eucharist is understood as a communal meal, it is appropriate to ask whether the elements used for that meal should consist of local food and drink in places where bread and wine are essentially foreign... Items such as liturgical furniture and vessels ought to enable the congregation to see a connection between the Eucharistic meal and their everyday meals...in order to emphasize the unity of the body of Christ in its celebration at the Eucharist" (Meyers, 91). If the Biblical principle of the Lord's Supper may be interpreted as the breaking of an everyday object to signify a community's unity, then the breaking of a rice cake, pita roll, or plantain may be just as if not more significant to a local church than a loaf of bread. When the concept of "one loaf" is demonstrated through a manner of communal living and Eucharistic worship that emphasize a unified faith over a literal interpretation, believers in all cultural contexts are best following the example set by Christ and His disciples. Unity, not legalism, was the quality Christ most strongly commanded His Church to seek after.

If that is so, and the congregation's unified observation of the Lord's Supper is the key element that Christ emphasized, it is evident throughout Scripture that bread and wine were most likely chosen by Christ not only for their practical daily function, but for their associations with life and celebration—two values that should characterize unified Christian community. Therefore, other foods with similar cultural connotations may produce the same effect in a Eucharistic Meal (R). We know, because of a passage in Matthew that gives the account of the first Lord's Supper, that Christ gathered with His

disciples on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Matthew 26:17). This feast was first ordained by the Lord in Exodus 12, when the Spirit of the Lord wreaked havoc in the land of Egypt, killing every first born son in every Egyptian household but passing over the homes of faithful Israelites who had marked their doorways with the blood of a lamb. In commemoration of the Lord's deliverance of their sons, Israelites were commanded to yearly celebrate the Passover by eating unleavened bread for a week. The first day—the day in which Christ instituted the Lord's Supper—was designated to become a “holy convocation” in which no work could be done and everyone must eat (Exodus 12:16, NKJV). Traditionally, this feast that Christ chose for the institution of the Eucharistic Meal not only represents a historical event in the story of the Jewish people, but, according to Rabbi and Reverend S. Fyne of Swansea, a promise of the Redemption to come: “You shall observe the unleavened bread.’ Why? ‘Because,’ continues the text, ‘on this self-same day have I BROUGHT you out of the land of Egypt.’ You, implies the text, *did not*—because you *could not*—come out of your *own* accord, by your *own* efforts, but had to be *brought* out. You were past self-rising. Yours was not a self-emancipation as to make ‘Chamez’ (leavened foods)...your Emancipation was a *Redemption*, pure and simple, and for a Redemption ‘Mazah’ (unleavened bread) is the appropriate symbol. Hence on this anniversary ye shall eat ‘Mazah!’” (Fyne, 2). The very night during which Christ drew His disciples near to share this meal with Him was regarded by observant Jews already to be an evening of solemn remembrance and celebratory anticipation for the Redeemer to come. In the same way, other New Testament accounts of Scripture referring to bread and wine are often synonymous with tidings of life and joy. In John 6:35 Jesus tells His disciples, “I am the bread of Life. He who comes to me shall never hunger, and He who believes in Me shall never thirst” (NKJV), while in John 2:1-11 He begins His earthly ministry with a miracle at a wedding that turns six pots of water into wine, thereby “manifest(ing) His glory” and leading many to believe in Him (NKJV). It is clear that throughout His life and ministry, Christ drew connections between the everyday food staples of bread and wine and the glimpses of redemption

His life and death represented. On the night He broke bread and shared wine, His disciples were already familiar not only with the pagan rituals of Gentile religions, but also with the ways in which Christ had redeemed these sacraments throughout His ministry.

While it was culturally understood in first century Jewish settings that unleavened bread and wine as part of the Feast of Unleavened Bread were able to carry strong connotations of redemption, remembrance, and celebration, such values are not always evident in twenty-first century contexts. As previously stated in the IALC Report, many non-Western countries immediately associate bread and wine with foreign American or European exports—often expensive, inconvenient to access, and bearing strong associations with war, colonialization, or racial oppression. Many non-Western cultures have a longstanding history of their own celebratory traditions and festivals that incorporate food, drink, dress, and ceremony particular to their cultural context. Historically, however, many Christian missionaries have rejected the intermingling of the Gospel with heathen traditions. Gerald Cooke sums up the attitudes of many contemporary Christians toward the “threat” of non-Christian cultures in his work on Christians and “rival religions”: “The general insecurity and lack of reflective thought about religion is demonstrated in the fact that many are loath to undertake a critical evaluation of the existence of multiple systems of belief, ways of life, policies, and issues which characterize our time. The shreds of living faith and commitment are for many so fragile that any proposal for rigorous examination of problematic aspects of religious life is shunned: ‘Better to cling to the little that is left to us than to jeopardize it in attempts to mix faith with understanding. We want answers, not questions.’” (Cooke, 21) The same sentiment could be applied to common misconceptions many Christian missionaries may have first carried with them when they shared the Gospel and traditional Christian sacraments with indigenous peoples on the continents of Asia and Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For the Anglican Church, the idea of restating their Eucharistic doctrinal beliefs may cause worry for some that this conflict between Western Christianity and indigenous culture may

rear its head again. However, in more circumstances than not, the intermingling of Christian orthodoxy and non-Western cultural tradition has proven to be robust and theologically rich, rather than dangerous.

Perhaps one of the most famous and significant examples of the interculturalization of the Eucharist into a non-Western setting is found in the traditional Japanese tea ceremony. Many historians have documented the time in Japanese history when Christianity was outlawed and Jesuit missionaries, in an attempt to weave Christian doctrine into the lives of Japanese believers without being caught by the government, partook of the Lord's Supper through the ancient and widely-practiced tea ceremony. But Naoko Frances Hioki goes one step further in her work and claims that while it may have been difficult for some to discern the doctrinal differences between Buddhism and Christianity, many Japanese Christians found partaking in the tea ceremony as part of their Eucharistic tradition enabled them to cross the bridge between Japanese culture and Christianity. The tea ceremony is described by Hioki as "focus(ing) on a small gathering in which the host lays fresh charcoal to boil water, serves a meal, then prepares powdered tea whisked with hot water. The tea is made in two forms: first, thick, in which a large amount of tea is carefully kneaded with hot water, and which the guests partake in turn from a single tea bowl; then thin, in which a smaller proportion of tea to water is deftly whisked for each individual guest" (Hioki, 128-129). Some Japanese converts and tea masters indebted their understanding of the Christian faith and community to these shared tea rituals. Justo Takayama Ukon, one such believer, was quoted as remarking that "he found *suki* (the tea service) a great help towards virtue and recollection for those who practiced it and really understood its purpose. Thus he used to say that in order to commend himself to God he would retire to that small house with a statue, and there according to the custom that he had formed he found peace and recollection in order to commend himself to God" (Hioki, 140). Hioki goes on to further comment that "Notwithstanding its origin in Zen, it was the radical inclusiveness and spiritual openness inherent in the tea ceremony that helped the Japanese Christians to advance in contemplation and find peace in the Japanese accommodation

of Christianity established in the realm of tea" (Hioki, 142). During a time in which the traditional Eucharistic meal of bread and wine would have been not only foreign but illegal in Japan, believers were nevertheless celebrating the life of Christ and the unity His death and resurrection brought the global Church through the sharing of a meal that was distinctly Japanese yet redeemed through the sharing of the Gospel.

If the sacred aspect of a communal meal and its ability to create a culturally recognized environment of remembrance and celebration were the key emphases of the first Lord's Supper, then promoting Eucharistic meals that are suited to pre-established cultural customs may better assist the advancement of the Gospel shared in cross-cultural contexts and strengthen the Anglican Church's global mission. Of course, the obvious problem with promoting a policy change in regard to the Anglican Church's stance on cross-cultural Holy Communion is that cultural customs are always changing, and oftentimes newly established traditions can hold as much weight as ancient traditions. Many Christians may fear that the allowance of Eucharistic substitutions may be taken too far, and soon any ordinary foods may be allowed at the Communion table, regardless of their historical significance or not. Gibson admits that "in the 1960's there were rumors, never confirmed in my experience, of Eucharists celebrated with Coca-Cola and potato chips. I sympathize with the distaste to which this gossip was greeted... It is true that we must find the sacred in the ordinary, but it is not true that we must confuse the ordinary and the trivial" (Gibson, 453). Perhaps the key difference in the indifferent casualty of a bag of potato chips and the honesty of an ordinary meal lies in the Eucharist's ability to transform a culture from the inside out. Pedro Arrupe defined the "interculturalization" of faith and culture as: "The incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation), but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about 'a new creation'" (Meyers, 92). Meyers goes

on to emphasize that a liturgical rite such as the Eucharist, when interculturated, “will take seriously the language, thought patterns, and ritual practices of the local culture” and stresses that such liturgy will enhance the Gospel in its dynamic expression of Christian faith intermingling with rich culture (Meyers, 93).

Potato chips may not make the cut, but this approach to the marriage of Gospel and culture brings new life to the sacrament of the Eucharist when celebrated through the breaking and sharing of everyday food—whether rice cakes, bananas, raisin water, potatoes, or any other aspect of common life that Christ’s glory can be seen working redemptive grace throughout. The tensions that Western Christians have placed on believers in other countries could be eased and transitioned into a more globally unified expression of shared faith through the practice of Eucharistic substitutes that make sense within pre-existing cultural contexts. To Christians growing up within the United States or the majority of European countries, a historical narrative of bread and wine is closely linked to both cultural and religious heritages. In some ways, Western Christians are very similar to the Jews Paul references in his first letter to the believers in Corinth: “But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:23, NKJV). Just like the first century Jews, Western Christians contain the groundwork for the Gospel woven into our heritage. Understanding the significance of the Eucharist may be at first difficult for many Westerners to understand, but the foundation of the Gospel narrative is usually already present, through childhood Sunday school stories, the faith of a grandparent, or the images of the first Lord’s Supper glorified in art history textbooks and illustrated Bibles. Non-Western believers, however, could have been more closely related to Gentiles in their original state. The concept of the Eucharist would be not only a stumbling block, but pure foolishness. Without any cultural understanding of the importance of bread and wine in a religious context, celebrating the Lord’s Supper would be so far removed from their everyday lives that many might feel not only Christian but Western to observe it in the traditional sense. Eucharistic substitutes provide opportunities for the

Gospel to flourish in a myriad of cultural settings and for Christ’s death and resurrection to be celebrated not only with many tongues, but with many distinct cultures.

The Anglican Church has made progress toward a wider acceptance of the interculturated of the Lord’s Supper, but their lack of a formally stated doctrinal acceptance of this practice means that Eucharistic substitutions remain widely unpracticed and unacknowledged. However, a better understanding of how this practice is able to radically transform communities in a Gospel-oriented way will hopefully push the Anglican Church toward rewording their doctrinal statement on Holy Communion in a way that will reflect these studies and reflect the diversity of their congregations. Perhaps more theologians of other Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox churches will also take this issue to heart and examine how the sacraments of worship are expressed through different denominations in the global Church. For if the Church is not able to address and make sense of every tribe and tongue, must it not also become an aspect of life that interweaves with, instead of competing with, every conceivable people and culture?

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