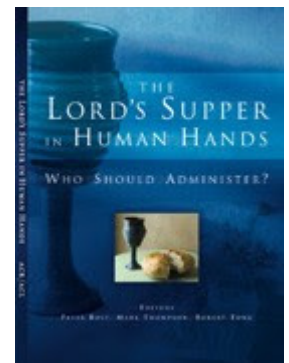


Review: The Lord's Supper in Human Hands

This is going to be one of those book reviews where I end up reviewing the issue rather than the book itself – the issue of who should administer the sacrament of Holy Communion within the Anglican Church – just priests (also known as presbyters), or also deacons and lay persons?



So let me indulge just one paragraph on the book itself. This book is a defense and promulgation of the argument by those in favour of lay and diaconal “administration” of Holy Communion. The authors are influential members of the Sydney diocese and they clearly and concisely present their argument, backing it up with the weight of discourse and evidence – including pages and pages of endnotes and citations. It is a very specific book – go to other places for a generalist discussion for the theology of the sacraments or on ecclesiastical orderings. Simply put, it gives voice to those interested enough to ask the Sydney diocese “What are you doing and why?” The chapters range from theological overview, to historical commentary, to summaries of synodical legislative processes. If you are interested in this debate and wish to provide a voice to be taken seriously – it doesn’t matter what your conclusions are, but you simply must engage with this book.

There are two areas that I wanted this book to cover – the area of theology/ecclesiology, and the legislative/political arena. It covers the latter very well, the former only reasonably. So let me consider the latter first.

As George Conger states on his blog the legislative/political key behind the recent Sydney synod decision rests on grammar. What does “assist” mean? What does “administer” mean? And can

we construe the *Ordination Service for Deacons Canon 1985* such that it meets the 1996 Appellate Tribunal's requirement for a General Synod canon to authorise the otherwise-constitutional practice of diaconal administration?

This is indeed asserted by Davies et al. who draws heavily on the conclusion of a more recent Appellate Tribunal consideration of the involvement of women in the episcopate:

"...they expressed the view that legislation is to be interpreted by the meaning of the words used and not on the basis of any supposed intention by the promoters of the legislation." (p75)

In other words – "if you can argue that way and get women bishops, then you can also argue that way and get diaconal presidency."

And I have a lot of sympathy for Davies' legal argument. But that sympathy results, in the main, not from delight in the present outcome, but in annoyance with *how* (not *the fact that*) women were allowed into the episcopate in the Anglican Church of Australia. A ruling on semantics – and it's resultant inconsistency with respect to Assistant Bishops – stole away conversation and debate on that issue – at least in the public arena. And so a maverick part of me enjoys the riposte from the other side of the divide.

But another part of me is saddened that ecclesiological debate in our church has come down to this – the back door of legal loop holes rather than the kerygmatically charged fervour of nutting things out together. In my mind semantics is, frankly, an insipid way to promulgate one's desires about issues that impact the whole. Even if the semantics can be argued – bring the explicit proposition anyway and debate that in the light of day. The "women bishops" issue will always have the dishonour of having been shoved in the side door. Do the proponents of diaconal and lay administration want to walk

that same shadowy road?

The other political issue, of course, is the relationship with GAFCON. Technically this shouldn't be an issue. As Robert Tong mentions in the last chapter, the Jerusalem Declaration states:

"We celebrate the God-given diversity among us which enriches our global fellowship, and we acknowledge freedom in secondary matters. We pledge to work together to seek the mind of Christ on issues that divide us."

And Tong then reiterates:

"It is our hope that those who disagree with our views will in a spirit of generosity and freedom accept such differences in secondary matters within the Anglican Communion, as together we continue to seek the mind of Christ." (p118)

And, while GAFCON should be the place where the difference between primary and secondary is clear and biblically sound, the feeling around the internet traps seems to be that many of the orthodox GAFCON leaders struggle mightily with one of their number going down this road. I can only hazard a guess what the Anglo-Catholics and African clericalists might think and say about this. If GAFCON is going to work, something more than awkward silence will be needed. The centre is only won through engagement and freedom to be vociferous.

Turning now to the ecclesiological aspects of the book, the first thing I noted was a congregationalist tendency. Although this was somewhat offset in later chapters, emphases such as these from Mark Thompson will do little to help build the breadth of support:

"The congregation should be able to authorise its own leaders, whether episcopally ordained or not." (p24)

"It is hard to reconcile the notion of the diocese as the local church with the New Testament terminology of church... The normal context of Christian ministry and fellowship is the congregation." (p31)

For me, at the heart of Anglican church order, for better or for worse, is the episcopate. We are led by bishops. We may not organise or release episcopal ministry very well. And indeed the present circumstance, such as Lambeth, seems to be a testimony to what happens when bishops don't bishop. But when it works, it works well – and it's what we've got.

And so I appreciated Peter Bolt's quoting of Canon Synge from the 1960's. I don't know Synge at all but Bolt's quote of him strengthened the overall argument.

"... The clergy have entrenched themselves in the area of oversight or episcopate as though they had the right to be there, thus converting a twofold tool of Christ, episcopate and laity, into a twofold institution, laity and clergy; the laity's vocation now becomes the support of the clergy and the vocation of the episcopate becomes the oversight by a senior clergy man of clerical machinery." (p101)

Episcopacy is more than just sacramental ministry – it is about oversight and "governance" in a spiritual way of God's people. It means carrying the burden of vision and the heart of Christ for people. It is "apostolic" in the sense of being sent and of sending people into gospel ministry. In my mind, episcopacy (with a little "e") is at the heart of the burden of Christian ministers for the "cure of souls" in their care. So, when Sydney Standing Committee affirms (as quoted by Bolt) "Ordination is primarily to a cure of souls: therefore only those in charge of parishes would be in priests' orders." (p40) what we are basically seeing is an affirmation of episcopal leadership (with a little "e") in congregational life. The framework thus restricts incumbency

to the order of presbyters and releases sacramental ministry, in an orderly manner, to all.

And I agree with much of it. It is silly to have Communion alone isolated as something magical when deacons and lay people can do everything else. And I do know of some priests who are more interested in celebrating communion than of exercising leadership and being gospel-and-people-focussed in their “cure.” I know what I see as prior and more important!

Consequently, I do not see lay or diaconal administration as inherently involving a downgrading of the role of the presbyter.

However, I can see a weakness in the argument and have one major concern.

The weakness is the lack of answers to these: Much is made of the fact that there is no biblical mandate for presbyteral administration. But where is the biblical mandate for the three orders at all? (I’m reminded of a friend who when asked if he believed in women’s ordination, said “I don’t even believe in men’s ordination”) More specifically – where is the biblical mandate for linking eldership with incumbency? Where is the biblical mandate for a *diocesan* (as opposed to *congregational*) college of presbyter-elders?

The concern is this: Incumbency inheres institution to the little-e episcopal function of the presbyter. What about church planters? It will be nice that a church-planting deacon might now be able to celebrate the Lord’s Supper with a new church and church-planting team – but why not make the church-planter a presbyter – surely he has a “cure” and is exercising eldership, albeit in terms defined other than an institutional incumbency? When will a church plant become a “parish” worthy of a “presbyter”? (I’ve heard the tongue-in-cheek answer referring to early synagogues – when 10 good men can gather around the torah!)

What I want to see in this debate – and from Sydney in particular – is an exposition of the biblical correlation (if any) between “orders” (bishop, priest, deacon), roles or functions (incumbent, assistant, church-planter, chaplain etc.) and giftedness (particularly in Ephesians 4 terms – Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Pastor, Teacher). Without this the “being consistent with the Bible” argument weakens and will be overridden with poorer arguments of tradition and legalese.

All this matches my intrigue with this line in the book:

“Nicholas Taylor speaks of advocates of lay administration amongst the ‘fresh expressions’ church planting initiative within the Church of England” (p80)

I don’t know Taylor but I can sympathise with those he references here. Fresh Expression ministry in an Anglican Context often feels like an experience in shoehorning square pegs into round holes and liturgical restrictions are a part of that. Unfortunately, this book also feels like I’m still being shoehorned – just in the other direction – because it argues from institution rather than to it.

So do I support lay and diaconal administration?

As a fresh expression person my answer simply is – whatever makes us free-er to be the church we are trying to be. And so at this stage:

Yes – theologically I cannot see a biblical reason why administering Communion should be restricted to priests/presbyters.

No – politically and pragmatically – it’s a secondary fight, not a primary fight. I don’t want to get caught up in the politics of semantics.

I just want to gather around the Gospel proclaimed in Word and

Sacrament and see lives transformed.



Review: Change Agents



Steve Chalke's *Change Agents* is literary finger food. Basically it is a series of 25 articles of the kind you would normally find on a blog somewhere as Steve Chalke, the leader of the church.co.uk and Oasis networks in England gives some snippets, some insights, some self-indulgent catharsis, and the occasional gratuitous anecdote. It's a good "toilet book" – by which I mean the sort you leave in that smallest of rooms to pick up and dwell on when you have a moment of necessary leisure.

And by all this I mean that this book is good – quite good actually. Light, but good.

The 25 lessons are short and honest and occasionally give you that hit between the eyes (or is that a smack on the back to stop you choking?). By way of example consider the following titles for some of these lessons:

"Action leads to insight more often than insight leads to action."

"Vision and frustration are the same thing."

"Success is three days between two crises."

"People follow people not disembodied principles."

"If it ain't broke, break it."

Indeed, it is the *honesty* of the book that gives it its value. I have come to value honesty – emotional honesty in

particular – as a significant virtue in others and an aspiration for myself. Chalke exhibits this. Consider this from the lesson entitled “Nothing is so simple that it cannot be misunderstood.”

“I’ve got some stuff to get off my chest... Someone that I spend a lot of time working very hard to help complained that they felt undermined by me. Half an hour later, another friend casually remarked that he sees me as a guy with good people skills who is just too busy to use them. That was a clever one; the mother of all backhanded compliments – and the straw that finally broke the camel’s back. I’m tired. I’m busy. I’m fed up. I’m overworked. I’m exhausted. I’m exasperated. I feel overwhelmed and undervalued. It seems like nothing I do is so simple that it can’t be misunderstood. Am I condemned to spend my life working myself into the ground for people intent on misreading my motives, misinterpreting my actions and, no doubt, misrepresenting my character behind my back?” (pp97-98)

His leadership pseudo-motivational speaker stuff is quaint (he even quotes Covey at one point). His theology is only implied and is somewhat questionable. And the Bible is not, shall we say, right at the centre of his discourse. But the honesty allows you to leave what is bad and take what is good – and there is much of that.

It is worthy of a place next to your toilet.



Review: The Freedom Paradox

Clive Hamilton.
The freedom
paradox.
Towards a
post-secular ethics.

It's been a while since I read a book that was as academic as Clive Hamilton's *The Freedom Paradox*. The book is centred around a desire to construct a philosophical basis for morality, ethics and societal operations that are beyond modernistic rationality but which is not dogmatically asserted or mystically ungraspable. It is a dense book but with a style I came to appreciate – “long words, but short chapters” might be a good way to sum it up.

I am not a philosopher. I cannot critique Hamilton as to the accuracy of his use of the likes of Plato, Kant, and, most frequently, someone I've never even heard of – Schopenhauer. But I'm pretty sure I was able to get a grasp on some of the concepts that he attempts to communicate. And I can bring to these concepts my own considerations as an applied theologian.

So to put myself out on a limb, my take on what Hamilton is trying to say goes something like this:

*Beginning with the age-old philosophical construct of how I, the observer, the thinker, the only thing that I can take as “given” (I think therefore I am), interact with the world, Hamilton takes us through the concepts of **phenomenon** and **noumenon**. Phenomenon relates to the things that I-the-given can see, hear, cogitate about and consider. Noumenon relates to the ideal that lies behind the things that I see. For instance (my example) – if I see another person I interact with them through observation, relational interaction (conversation and the like), and thoughts (rationality) and emotions – these are things pertaining to the phenomenon. But the other person is more than just the conglomeration of my own reasonings and feelings and observations – that person is something in-and-of-themselves. The other person exists beyond*

the phenomenon in the unrealisable but real "noumenon."

Hamilton seizes on this notion of the noumenon and disagrees with rationalists like Kant who assert that the noumenon is unknowable. Indeed, Hamilton says, it cannot be known by rational thought, but only by an "unsensible intuition." And through such intuition we can know not only the noumenal self of others but also our own noumenal self – which are one and the same Self (capital "S"). This possibility of noumenal engagement then becomes a philosophical and post-secular (non-religious) basis for moral engagement, ethics, considerations of the meaning of life and so forth. For instance, I will treat another person differently if I can recognise (intuit) in them a noumenal essence (part of the Self that includes myself as the Subject of the engagement) rather than simply treating them as a (phenomenal) Object.

I hope that's not too much of an abuse of his argument! And there are a number of things to commend that flow out of it, for instance:

- This is one of the more robust engagements with the thinking of postmodernity that I've come across – in tearing down the idol of pure rationality Hamilton does not slip into (de)construction and the like.
- His consideration of true freedom being "inner freedom" that is far beyond the unfreedom put forwarded by populist capitalism and advertising has truth to it. On page 21, for instance, he writes, "Western society is characterised by an ever-devouring conformity flimsily camouflaged by a veneer of confected individuality..."
- He often lends weight to ethics I would agree with – on page 120 he affirms the noumenal interaction of the sexual act and notes, "Sex in porn is not the exploration of one with another; it is an act of relief, like defecation."
- His conclusions embrace some fundamental ideas that I also embrace – the innate (not merely socially

constructed) value of life, for instance, and the recognition of a “noumenal” (what I would call “spiritual”) foundation to our worldview.

The main chasm that appears when you interact theologically with this book is wrapped up in a question asked me once by a young man at an SU camp – “Will, do you believe in Jesus, or in the *idea* of Jesus?” Hamilton presents some ideas and some of them align with the *idea* of Jesus. But without an historical, phenomenal narrative to hang them on Hamilton’s arguments and considerations about the noumenon lack authority or weight – they become ironically, or perhaps appropriately, his *own* intuitions of what noumenally is. This flaw is starkly present throughout but especially in the very last paragraph of the book which contains this sentence:

“So, if we suppose that the noumenon’s manifestation in the phenomenon is not without purpose but that the noumenon is intentioned, creation has a meaning.” (p247)

Hamilton has simply intuited (or *supposed*) that the noumenon is “intentioned.” And despite the fact that I, for different reasons, happen to agree with him on this point, the meaning of life, in his argument, simply rests, frankly, on his own intuitive guesswork.

All Hamilton’s comments on the content or nature of the noumenon rest on such a basis. Because of this propensity to simply rely on some self-revelatory “special knowledge”, and also because of the many allusions to Eastern philosophies and religions, I found myself quickly comparing Hamilton’s arguments to the ancient view of gnosticism – against which much of early Christian (even New Testament era) thought is presented. Indeed a contemporary gnostic website defines gnosticism as “the teaching based on Gnosis, the knowledge of transcendence arrived at by way of interior, intuitive means” which seems to affirm Hamilton’s basic thrust. And, by way of

example, Hamilton's "avatars of virtue" come across as positively (while not literally) aeonic – i.e. be construed, as the website puts it, to "exist between the ultimate, True God and ourselves":

"... the noumenon needs interpreters, individuals who by common consent represent metaphysical empathy in the phenomenal world. These are individuals whose life story embodies a message that echoes powerfully in the consciousness of ordinary people. Whether these figures are secular or religious, their moral selves are closer to the surface and cause them to radiate a kind of moral greatness." (p166, emphasis mine)

And this ancient hue also colours Hamilton's view of Christ, evidenced when he tackles the issue of "Eternal Justice" in which he posits that categories of justice and compassion cannot belong in the noumenon and writes:

"Jesus' appeal from the cross for divine mercy was a moment of human weakness in which he forgot his own teaching." (p173)

Which brings us to the main crux (pun intended) of the Christian engagement with this book. Hamilton can in the end only appeal to his own *gnosis* when he puts transcendence, "unsensible intuition", or some form of engagement with the Moral Self above atonement as the answer to the human predicament. He places his idea of Christ into his own framework of ideas and does not interact with the glorious scandal that it is at the heart of Christian thought and spirituality – that, to borrow Hamilton's words, *the noumenal can and has been made known in the phenomenon* – God made flesh in Jesus Christ. If we are to engage with what truly is we must engage with the one who "was and is and is to come" and speaks to us the words of Truth. We know the noumenon because the noumenon has been made known.

And so this meaty book has bits that can't easily be swallowed. While churches are acknowledged as being "keepers of the transcendent" there is no spiritual significance afforded the church in an implied kowtowing to the age of post-secularism. I would disagree – we are not bastions of dogma, we are the place where, in Christ, ordinary phenomenal people are able to eat, live, work, relate on a noumenal, spiritual foundation.

There is some fantastic exploration in this book. There are some moments where the reader says "mmm, interesting perspective, I hadn't seen it that way before." The man has an intellect and I admire how he has put his thoughts together. But in the end, and perhaps this is unfair as it may not be one of his aims, this book presents us without hope or assistance to those who find themselves stranded in the phenomenon of this fallen world.

